

Telephone interview with former HM3 Robert Ingram, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, Medal of Honor recipient for action in Vietnam. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 4, 18 November, 16 December 2003.

Where are you from originally?

I was born in Clearwater, FL, in January 1945.

Did you go to school there?

Yes.

What were the circumstances that had you join the Navy? I had heard that you planned on some other field besides being a corpsman.

I joined the Navy in September of '65. I had been in the DCT program--the work program in high school.

What was DCT?

Cooperative education. They sent you out and hooked you up with a job. It let you work while you were going to high school. You went to school half a day and went to work half a day. I happened to get a job in a radio-TV repair place where I was doing bench work with a retired Air Force AE. I sat at a table 3 ½ to 4 hours a day soldering and un-soldering condensers and resistors and checking capacities and putting them back together until they worked.

That must have gotten pretty old after awhile.

Well, it did, but the thought of it got even older because when I took the test for the Navy I scored extremely on the electronics area and got an AE guarantee when I went in the Navy. As you know, the AE school is probably one of the best schools the Navy has. So when I went in boot camp I had an AE guarantee. When I was in boot camp at Naval Training Center San Diego I caught pneumonia and was put in the dispensary. While I was in there, spinal meningitis broke out. I didn't catch it but what I experienced there was seeing corpsmen who worked with dedication beyond my imagination. No one in my family had ever been in anything but truck driving, construction, that type of blue collar stuff at best. No education, so to speak. When I watched these corpsmen and their dedication. These guys working double and triple shifts and their enthusiasm toward their job and what they were getting out of it . . . I didn't know what it was but I wanted it.

When I got out of the dispensary and went back to my company to finish up boot camp, I went down and requested a change of MOS. I got in Hospital Corps school and worked very hard because my study habits were severely limited.

Was the Corps School there at San Diego or did you go to Great Lakes?

I went to San Diego and graduated from Hospital Corps school, number 10 out of 32. One got discharged so I was really 10 out of 31. They told us that the top 10 percent would get automatic B School. I didn't get that; I got orders to Fleet Marine Force. Of course, when I read the orders that said FMSS [Field Medical Service School], Del Mar, California, I said, "What's this?" Everybody just laughed and walked off. I had made a friend with one of the corpsmen there at the hospital so I went to him and the guy had tears coming out of his eyes. He said, "You're in the Marine Corps."

I said, "No way. I didn't join the Marine Corps." All I wanted to do was go to surgical school at that point. And I had worked very hard to get there, and got the shaft, so to speak. I found out in '65 how I had got the shaft but that's another story.

So, I ended up in Field Med School after I requested captain's mast. The captain told me I'd do whatever they told me to do.

You had the right to request a captain's mast?

You didn't have the right, I don't think. I was so distraught and aggravated over the thing that I went straight to the captain at Naval Hospital Balboa and sat outside his office for about 2 hours. I finally got in and told him what I thought. He very gently pulled this sheet down on the wall and said, "In case you didn't read it, that's the contract you signed when you came in the Navy. It tells you that you will go anywhere we tell you to and do what we tell you to. Any questions?"

And I said, "I'm not going."

And he said, "Well, you've got a choice. You can go to the brig or you can report for duty." So I reported for duty at Del Mar. I checked in and was just as dismayed there. I went through Field Med School there. It was a very tough school at that time.

What do you remember about the training?

You did PT in the morning--a long run in the sand up to your knees. That's where they also train the Recon. That was their main base. So we ran through their courses, then showered and went to class, stayed in class until some time in the afternoon. Then we marched to lunch and then back out to a class in the early afternoon during the middle of the day, then back to PT. Every so many days, you'd have an increment of what amounted to Marine Corps boot camp. We had a Navy chief corpsman who was running the medical part, and then a Marine DI [drill instructor] who was running the Marine part of it. On thus and such days we would go out and do maneuvers like the Marines would do to get us accustomed to functioning with the Marines--the rifle range, live fire, crawling under the wire, etc. One day of each week we did what the Marines had been going through in boot camp so we'd understand what they'd been through and be able to follow them.

At that time, you were probably using the M14s.

In the training part, they were M1 Garands. But we got very little training. You snapped in for about an hour and then you had so many rounds you had to shoot. You essentially had to hit the target so many times to qualify. It was not truly a weapons qualification by any means. It was just familiarization with the rifle--how to load and aim it. As far as tearing it apart and putting it back together, that was kind of a joke. With the .45, they trained us pretty well because it was going to be our personal weapon.

You say that stripping the Garand was a joke. Did you not really learn how to do it?

No. It was very basic because a hospital corpsman is Geneva Convention and are not supposed to be carrying weapons per se other than for personal protection. You are aware of that, aren't you?

Oh, yes. But in practical combat circumstances, the Geneva Convention didn't amount to much.

That part of the story came much later.

So, you got a .45 to learn how to strip, clean, and shoot.

Right, which gave us the basics. The training was more physical training than anything else trying to get us in shape. The dropout rate was terrible, particularly amongst the higher rank enlisted guys. Probably 70 percent of us were right out of corps school and the rest of them were E-3s, 4s, 5s, 6s, and we even had one chief and two doctors in our group running through the same school.

And you say the dropout rate among those was much higher?

Oh, yeah. There weren't very strict weight controls back then. You take a corpsman who has been sitting on a unit in the hospital for 4, 5, 6 years. To begin with, in those days, rank was not made very easily. If you made E-6 in 8 or 10 years you were doing very good. When I actually got with the Marines in '64, when you saw a corporal, you saluted him. That was the way the rank structure went. He was a little god in himself. You didn't make rank unless you had it together. It's quite a bit different from what I've seen these days.

What was the deal as far as additional medical training you needed to get to be with the Marines?

It was centered around first aid itself--advanced first aid. As far as respiration and bleeding and bandaging and tourniquets and bracing and maintaining life until they could be evacuated. It was really quite basic, certainly not like Field Med School today because I've visited those schools today. They are far, far advanced from where we were when we came in.

When did you graduate from Field Med School?

I think it was about April or May of '64.

Where did they send you then?

Unofficially, I went to Recon first. I was only there for 3 days until I found out you had to volunteer for Recon, and I wasn't about to volunteer for Recon. I went from there to ITR (Intensive Rifle Training). As a hospital corpsman, all of the routine care and injections for the Marines who came out of boot camp--that's their next school--rifle training.

So you went to ITR, not to learn how to use the rifle but to take care of the guys who were.

Right, as a staff corpsman. Things did not work out well there at all. I didn't like the corpsmen because they didn't like patients. They liked beating up on kids coming out of boot camp. I got into some physical discussions with some of the corpsmen there. Basically, they grabbed me and tried to beat the shit out of me. When you take care of Marines, they take care of you. The reason for my argument there was because I was trying to . . . What happened was a corpsman walked up and put three syringes in his hand and slapped it in this guy's arm all at one time. It was improper technique, improper medicine, and inappropriate. When I said something about it, I was told where to shove it; I was the new guy. No rank, no privilege, and keep my mouth shut. I told the guy that if I saw him pull that crap again, I would have him on the pad

somewhere. A few minutes later, one of them grabbed me from behind, and the other one started working on me. Fortunately, the Marine who was the one I was trying to defend happened to be standing outside. Unofficially, somebody kicked ass in the dispensary.

When I woke up, a Marine captain was standing in the doorway and saying, "You're one bad ass boy." I had no idea what he was talking about. All I remember was about the third lick. I was taken over to the guard shack and the following morning I was shipped out to 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. I guess I was tagged as a trouble maker.

Was your new unit at Pendleton at the time?

Yes. They were over at Margarita. ITR was on the north end of Camp Pendleton. I went to Bravo 1/7. I think I was tagged at that point as a trouble maker. I had nothing but trouble when I was in Bravo Company.

What actually happened when you got there? Your reputation had preceded you?

I think so but I don't know that officially. I think the word was out that I was a problem. And my attitude wasn't good either. I resented severely being put in the Marine Corps. I spent about 9 months with Bravo Company and I needed to get out of there. One night the company clerk told me, "Hey Doc, you've gotta get outta here. They're gonna hurt you." He had overheard a conversation. So I went back to the battalion aid station. H & S company is where you truly belong and then you're temporarily assigned out to the various companies. So you belong to battalion aid station and then you are put out in line companies as a corpsman but you still report back to battalion aid. So I went back to battalion aid and told them I wanted a transfer to another company and they all laughed. I pushed it a little bit and one of them jumped up and said, "Hey. Put him in Charley Company. Nobody wants to go to Charley Company." So the chief said, "You got it. Take these orders over and give them to the CO and you're out of here. Report to Charley Company tomorrow morning, first thing."

I walked into Charley Company and it was totally different, night and day. I was welcomed through the door by the CO who had also gotten the word that I was a troublemaker. He enlightened his officers to that effect. They attached me to weapons platoon, introduced me to all the guys, one on one. This was totally different from Bravo Company. As you talk to the officers of Charley Company now who knew all the officers in Bravo Company, that does not surprise them at all.

They attached me to weapons platoon in Charley Company. The platoon commander was a mustanger. He didn't actually come up through the ranks per se. He left the Marines as a corporal, went through college and came back in as an officer. The first thing he did was to introduce me to everybody and said, "This is Doc Ingram. Get him a rack, get his locker squared away." He then looked at me and said, "Doc, you're not going to be real busy down here. I want you to go with each squad and learn all the weapons we have here and how to use them. I know that you're a non combatant but it may come sooner than you think, the time you may need to use these weapons. If you never use them it will be perfect." How much more right could he have been?

He must have known something, didn't he?

I'm not sure. I've talked to him since and he doesn't remember saying that. The guys remember that.

The Marines love to teach. Say you've got a machine gun squad. You've got a corporal in charge and maybe six guns. So they take the corpsman and teach him everything they could from every aspect you can imagine--if he was interested in learning.

Did you have a particular interest in weapons?

I really didn't have any interest in the Corps. Up to that point, I felt like I had been mistreated, misguided, and sent the wrong way and resented the hell out of it.

It was some time in the first week or two that I was on liberty down in Oceanside when I got into a discussion with a bunch of Marines and it ended up in a pretty big fight situation. A guy pulled a knife on me and I was in deep trouble. And all of a sudden, from around me came a bunch of Marines--Charley Company guys. They came in to take care of me in unbelievable ways and I became their corpsman. It changed my attitude. Well, I'm here and I might as well make the best of it and what a great bunch of guys to do it with. These were guys who would stand up beside you and sacrifice for you. And that became my basic attitude from that time forward.

So it was kind of an epiphany. They came to save your neck in that situation and you realized that these were a helluva bunch of guys.

Exactly. A couple of months later we started training very intensively for some reason. Charley Company was very well known for that since they spent about 5 days a week in the field. The other companies were no where into that intensive training because their commanding officers didn't push it. We had a lieutenant for a commanding officer who was insistent upon us being the best there was. Whenever the reserves came on base, we were the ones who were their aggressors. We had to give up our weekends. There was very little trouble in the company and very little time to get in trouble because he kept us in the field. It was constant training from daylight until dark, 5 days a week. At 4 o'clock on Friday afternoon you were on liberty unless you had call, which wasn't so bad after all. There's an old adage in the Marine Corps that says that idle time is dangerous. "So clean your rifle again."

"But, sir, I just cleaned it nine times."

"Well clean it a tenth."

Anything to keep them busy. Otherwise they got in trouble. Our CO kept us in the field--rain, shine, sleet, or snow. As far as live-fire exercises, Charley Company did more live-fire exercises than anybody in the regiment because that was what the CO thought was proper training for them. So, he took advantage of every opportunity he could. It all paid off when we hit Vietnam.

When you were doing all this training with Charley Company, was Vietnam something that was on your mind and the minds of your buddies?

Not really. We were all just getting by, so to speak. You worked, went back and ate and slept, and kind of let time go by. That's basically what it was. We stayed in the field, did what we were told. If we did well, he stayed off our butts and if we didn't, he stayed on our butts. I was treated exactly like the Marines with very few exceptions. And they were treated well. The big thing with Charley Company was respect. Everybody had respect for each other. That means the officers had respect for the enlisted men and vice versa. The officers knew their men very well--1 officer and 34 men and he knew every one of them backwards and forwards. He was with them on a constant basis. This was a lot different from the way the Navy normally

does it. The Navy has some good teams too, but those teams are usually submariners, since it's a small group, or the SEALS. Small group operations demand teamwork and the harder it gets, the closer they get. That was the basis of our training. It's okay to hate the "old man" as long as you love your brother.

Being the close-knit group Charley Company had become, had you established your reputation as their corpsman--their doc--by this time?

Exactly. And when we shipped out of the States. . . We had no idea we were going to Vietnam. We were told to mount up, get our gear together; we're going out on an operation doing an amphibious landing on what they called "White Beach" in California, which is Pendleton's beach access to the Pacific.

They took us down to San Diego, loaded us aboard ships, and we thought we were going to White Beach in Pendleton. We ended up in White Beach, Okinawa.

What ship were you on?

I have no idea. It was an APA--a worn out APA. It was terrible. We were on water rations from day 1. There was no ventilation in the sleeping quarters at all. Most of us slept on deck.

After a couple of days at sea, you must have gotten the idea you weren't going to be landing at Pendleton.

It was about the fifth day that the rumors started going around. Finally, the battalion commander got on the deck of the ship and made an announcement. "Gentlemen, we're not going back to Pendleton. We're on our way to Vietnam via Okinawa." And everyone looked at each other and said, "Where's Vietnam?" Nobody knew where it was.

That was pretty early in the game, yet. That was '64. Things hadn't really gotten to the way they were in '67 and '68.

The only people who knew what Vietnam was and had any idea what we were getting into, were some of the older NCOs who had heard about it or had met somebody who had been over there as an advisor. Some of these guys had been in and out of there since about '62 but always in an advisory or training capacity rather than as part of a fighting force.

We hit Hawaii and were there for 1 night. And then we headed out to sea, blew the boilers, then came back in and got another night in Hawaii.

We eventually ended up in Okinawa, settled there, began doing some PT and some so-called classroom training. A week later we were at what they called NTA--Northern Training Area--the guerrilla warfare school. There we met a tall, young staff sergeant who had just come back from Vietnam. The guy was whacko as a fruit cake. There was something about the look in his eyes that would scare you to death. He was there for a purpose and he carried out that purpose very well. He got the point across to us that the game was over.

Real life had just begun. Training at NTA went very well. It included the hospital corpsman as far as what kind of injuries you were going to see from gunshot wounds to the punji sticks and traps and what have you. There were live-fire exercises in the jungle. And it was really a thick jungle up in northern Okinawa. There were a lot of confidence courses two to three times a day. Then we did cliff-repelling. That was exciting. Then we went to chopper-repelling into water.

We were training there in Okinawa from mid-May thru the second week in July '65 and then we headed out to Vietnam. We landed there in July. The Seabees were already there. We took perimeters on the airfield and were there for about 4 days. We had a little experience with live fire at that point--enemy fire. It taught us a little more about being careful.

So you landed on the beach. Was this a regular amphibious landing?

No. We pulled up in the channel at Chu Lai, went in by peter boat, landed our gear, and moved ashore. Of course, we had just left Okinawa and had 50 guys with the clap when we got there. It was 130 degrees on the beach, not a good time to have gonorrhea.

How did you treat it?

Penicillin, the old type. You had to mix your water with it and shake it up. It would separate on you if you weren't careful. Well, at 130 degrees, it will separate real quick.

It was actually 130 degrees.

It was 130 degrees on the beach then.

So you had some initial impressions of Vietnam.

They were not good but we were scared enough that the heat didn't seem to bother us too much.

In other words, the temperature was the least of your worries?

Yes. The temperature was a problem but what we tried to do was stay under some kind of shade. If you could stay close to the water, you usually had some breeze. So you made up your makeshift covers, tried to stay out of the sun and under the shade. There were some trees when we moved out on the perimeter that were large enough to create some shade. At night it would get down in the 80s so you were comfortable, so to speak. July in Vietnam is not a fun time.

Where were you billeted? Did you simply live in field conditions?

This was strictly field conditions. We're talking about a shelter half, a pup tent at best, a makeshift shelter with your shelter half. This was really roughing it. That's all we had.

About the last of the second week on the perimeter, we headed into "Operation Starlight."

How was Charley Company equipped at this time?

We were ready. We had live ammunition on the line.

So, you had your .45 and these people carried M14s at that time?

All M14s.

Did you have M60s as far as machine guns?

Oh yeah. M60s, M79 grenade launchers, M72s. We had 60mm mortars along with the company. They had a mortar battalion which used 80mm mortars. But we didn't carry those; we carried the old Korean and World War II 60mm.

How about you as a corpsman? What did you carry for gear?

A Unit 1 and that's it.

Do you recall what was in the Unit 1 at that time?

Bandages, morphine, surgical kit, and scalpels. There was some rolled gauze, antibiotic ointments. No oral medications at all. The only medications we had was what I brought with me from the States. And that was in my pack--basically decongestants, APCs, which they eventually took off the market because of the phenacetin in it. It was found to do liver damage, kidney damage. Between the aspirin and the morphine, there was nothing. The morphine syrettes you had to protect and save for the time you needed them.

You didn't have serum albumin or plasma. You wouldn't have had any of that stuff.

No IV medications whatsoever. That was basically battalion aid station--rear echelon.

You probably had a flak jacket; that must have been standard issue.

Yes. The flak jacket was a fiberglass type. They issued jungle utilities on Okinawa which was a different type material that would absorb sweat. You learned quickly how to wear no underwear, no undershirt, and let it all hang loose, so to speak. Those uniforms were designed for you to sweat and for the air to dry your body by keeping the humidity in the uniform. And they worked very well, nothing like the utilities today.

What about your boots?

The jungle boots were issued in Okinawa--leather fronts with canvas on the side. Of course, they didn't come in very many sizes so they didn't fit very well at all.

I heard a story about an incident you had with boots.

The jungle boots generally came in a D width. I wear a triple E width. As much humping as I was doing out there, I'd wear a set of boots out in 2 or 3 weeks. Trying to get them was another story. The only thing you could get was in a D width. I had a situation one night where I was the senior representative being critiqued by GEN [Lewis] Walt. He was one neat fellow, a nitty gritty Marine. Walt looks down and says, "Doc, you need to get you some boots."

"Sir, I can't get any boots."

"Well, you're wearing through those."

"I can't get any that will fit."

He then grabbed the squawk box, as we called it, and called back to supply. He was talking to a staff sergeant back in supply. He didn't identify himself but said, "I want two sets of 9 ½ whatever," and the guy laughed and said, "Yeah, you and who else? There isn't a chance in hell you're gonna get anything."

And Walt said, "Do you know who you're talking to?"

The guy says, "No, and I don't give a shit."

"Well, my name's Louie."

"Louie Lipshit?"

"No. Louie Walt, and sergeant, I don't give a flying fuck where you get 'em. You will have two pair of boots out here for Doc Ingram and you will have them within 5 days, or you will know who I am for sure."

About 4 days later this chopper comes in. Now we're at an outpost about 8 miles out in front of the lines in Chu Lai. Well, this chopper comes flying in and we're not expecting it. Any time you're not expecting it, you think there's some high ranking officer on it. The chopper lands and this guy jumps off and begins asking people questions. He comes up the hill and says, "Doc Ingram, where's Doc Ingram?" And he has this paper bag in his hand. He comes up to me and says, "You're Doc Ingram? Sign here. These are the boots that General Walt ordered."

Were they the triple E's?

They were a set of the old Korean type boots with the rough solid leather all the way through. They were the most comfortable boots I ever put on in my entire life. And that was the worst part of getting shot. They took my boots.

But finally I had two sets of boots that fit. I never got to wear the second pair. That was mid February and I got hit in March. I always wanted to meet Walt again so I could thank him for my boots.

What were the circumstances of GEN Walt being in your area when you needed those boots?

This was part of another war story down the trail. February 12th. February 8th was a bad day. That's the day they gave me the Silver Star for. We ran no patrols between February 8th and February 12th. I was doing two to three patrols a day at that point because we didn't have enough corpsmen. The first patrol out was Second Platoon and we went out and set up an ambush. We had a gook coming down the hill and we took him up with us. It was a mistake because we'd set in there before; you never set in the same place twice.

Eventually, he jumped on a mine and it took everybody out but me. I had one Marine who had scrap all through him. The evacuation chopper wouldn't set down. It was about 8:30 at night. It was dark and he said he didn't have enough protection, and he wouldn't set down. The Marine who was flying the weapons chopper set down. He was on the old UH's, the old gas-powered jobs. We piled the guys on there and he couldn't get off. He's sitting there trying to hover that thing on the hill, a very small-topped hill. We took off all the flak gear, all the ammunition, all their water and fuel cans. He still couldn't pull off. Then we took off a Marine - the guy who stayed with me out there. The radio was blown all to crap, the Marine was shocky, and the chopper finally got off the ground minus the two of us.

It took me about an hour and a half to get back in with this Marine. When we got in, Walt was standing there waiting.

You said the chopper left you guys out there?

Yes. We were interested in getting the wounded out.

How did you get back? Did you walk?

Yes.

The Marine who was with you was also wounded?

Yes. He had scrap all through him but he was basically functional.

Did you have to carry him or did he walk out under his own power?

He walked under his own power; I wasn't carrying him. That sonofabitch was big.

I want to get this situation straight. You guys were out on a patrol. Was it an NVA or a Vietcong you encountered?

Well, we went to set up an ambush outside this village so we could guard the trails that were coming into the village because the Vietcong were coming in there at night. This was not the regular squad I went out with. There were no other corpsmen to go so this was the first patrol after that bad incident a few days earlier.

When we went out there, the sergeant decided that would set up on this hill which overlooked the pathways coming in. I had been on that hill before. And when I was on that hill before, I was positioned behind a rock on the forward slope. When we up the hill I automatically went over to that position while everybody else went up to the top. That's when they took this enemy soldier who was coming down the hill . . . Normally, anybody who could identify where you were, you took and held overnight, then let him go the next morning. Well, they took him to the top of the hill where he had planted a very large mine. And he jumped on the mine, which hit everybody in the entire squad. It took out the entire squad except for me. Amazingly, everyone there lived. We had some guys who were scalped. The sergeant had some bad injuries on his right arm. It was basically severed at the humerus. They did manage to save it, by the way. The guy who came back with me was a 3.5 rocket man.

All these wounded squad members were then taken out by this chopper that had trouble getting off the ground. All except for you and the one guy with the shrapnel wounds.

That and all the flak gear, the weapons, all the ammunition, and all the fuel from the chopper. Here we were on the top of a hill about 20 feet wide on top and 5 miles out in front of the outpost, which was 8 miles out in front of the lines. And you know that they know, if they're out there, that you're injured. It was a bad situation. I expended almost every round that we had around that area.

This is at night and the bad guys are all over the place.

We don't know whether they're out there or not.

But you're not taking any chances.

No. Being as experienced as we were at that point and having the other guy in bad shape, I took charge and sat him down behind a gun and hooked up 300 rounds of belt on the machine gun and told him what I wanted taken out. And he just melted the thing down for me, which is what I wanted. You can't leave the weapons. You cannot leave operational weapons for the enemy.

So your goal at this point was to get rid of all the ammunition. If you took out some of the enemy, so much the better. But you wanted to get the weapon so hot that you'd just burn out the barrel and render it useless.

Right. And then destroy the magazine afterward.

Was this an M60?

Yes. We had two M60s out there that night because we were set up for ambush. We basically melted the barrels down. We used a couple of 3.5 shells in this hole, put the magazines

in the hole, broke them up, pulled pieces out. We got all the weapons and all the ammunition and then I had one very nice big explosion after the first one. In doing so, I finally cleaned the hill off. I had nine claymores with me. I positioned the claymore around the hill and put this Marine down in a washout. When they went off, it kind of mowed the grass, so to speak. I made enough impact on top of that hill and everything around it to let them think that there was more than two of us there. And when I came off the hill I didn't take the normal path. I went right straight down through the middle of the village destroying everything I could along the way.

When you left the hill with that other Marine, you were pretty well armed.

Oh yes. I brought about 20 grenades through the village on the way through. And I'm pushing him, "Run, run, run, move it." And I'm screaming and yelling, making them think there's 55 people out there. There we are running through the middle of the village, the last place in the world they would ever dream that you'd be going. But that was the closest point between point A and point B. We had no radio. It had been blown to pieces.

Then we had to worry about when you got back that your own men would be shooting you because we had no communication. You don't want to get close enough for them to hear your voice. People are spooky out there.

So I did what the sergeant who died on February 8th told me one time. "If you ever get caught out without a radio, do the following: The North Vietnamese do not possess tracers. AK-47s shoot 30 rounds, not 20. M14s shoot 20. Load yourself 20 tracers in a magazine, get behind a huge rock area where they can't blow you up before somebody realizes what's going on, put your weapon right straight up in the air and shoot 20 tracers on automatic fire."

And that's what we did. One of the guys recognized the signal and knew exactly who it was. So they brought a team out and picked us up out there and brought us back in. Of course when I got in, Louie Walt's standing there and wants to talk to the senior man.

"Who's the senior man here?" He looked at me and said, "You're Doc Ingram. Where's the Marines?"

"The only Marine left just went out on a chopper."

And he said, "Well, I've never critiqued a corpsman before. What the hell happened out there?"

Of course, you don't tell the general all the little details. He wanted to know if we had seen the enemy and I hadn't seen any enemy.

"How many enemy did ya kill?"

"None. Only the guy who blew himself up on the mine."

So this team goes out there the next day and they see the destruction that I did. And they thought they had a loose screw out there somewhere. And I'm not about to talk to them. I've already learned that you don't talk to these people. They wear starched uniforms and shiny bars and don't understand. They talked about locking me up and I requested mast to see the colonel. COL Kelly and I had met on two previous occasions, one on Okinawa and one during Vietnam. I knew that he had been a machine gunner in Charley Company during World War II at Iwo. He was also commander of Charley Company in Korea. Charley Company's nickname is "Suicide Charley." They got the name because they took suicide missions in three wars.

**So this is how General Walt happened to be in the camp when you came back in.
And that's when he took care of your boot situation.**

Right.

Did this all happen in the operation in which you got the Silver Star?

No. This was after the Silver Star.

How did the Silver Star incident come about?

The Silver Star incident was where Intelligence in the rear decided that there was a North Vietnamese group in this valley. And they were right. They just didn't know where and how many. They wanted an expeditionary size patrol out in this uncharted area. It happened to be the south end of the Mylai Valley. We went out and happened to have a flank out. Our CO went with us and 3rd Platoon commander and 3rd Platoon and heavy weapons. We needed lots of weapons because we needed to be prepared but we weren't. We walked into a three-point ambush by a battalion of NVA. They killed 12. Only six people walked out of there that day. The commanding officer, the platoon commander, the two Marine captains that were in intelligence that wanted to go out there and see what it was like. They got the opportunity. The corpsman, and Harvey Kappeler. It was a bad day.

When did the ambush incident occur?

It was February 8th

So the hill incident took place after the ambush.

Yes. And I wasn't a well man psychologically at that point.

Was this as a result of being in combat so much or was it the ambush incident that set you off?

The ambush finalized my psychological profile at that point.

Were you the only corpsman in that group on February 8th?

No. There were three corpsmen out there that day. One was with the CO. No. There were only two of us. On that day we led the platoon out. We had about six men out on the dike about 300 or 400 yards going toward a village. Then the village lit up with all these North Vietnamese in there. And they were very good at what they did. They were dug in over on our right, probably 800 to 1000 yards, a pretty long distance. They were basically hitting everything they were shooting at. And it was all small arms automatic fire.

We were also getting it back from the right flank and we were getting it from the back of us. We didn't even know we were getting it from that direction. I don't know how many there were back there but they were in an excellent position. Everybody who was on the dike was hit at one point or another. The squad leader was SGT [Gerald] Stansell. . . The machine gunner was second from point and the machine gun went down. You cannot afford to have a machine gun down. That's your real fire power. The sergeant then went after the gun. When he got there, he got hit and went down behind it.

I was already out there trying to take care of these guys--dragging them back in. So I went and took the gun. About that time, our guys came in on the right flank and chased the NVA out of the village from the other direction. They would not lay down artillery and wouldn't use air because of the people in the village. We were in a helluva bind.

Basically, when the fire subsided, we got the guys out by chopper. Then we tried to reorganize. We turned around to go back the other way and walked about 50 yards when we got hit by three Vietcong. They were not NVA. It was a terrible error on their part. We had just lost

12 men and had two or three injured. Our attitudes were not real good. Those three Cong had no chance in hell. Nobody even squatted; we just charged and killed all three and some civilians who got in the way.

This was in the village?

Outside the village.

Was this an M60 that you took over?

Yes. You had to have the M60 up. The A gunner, as he was called--the assistant gunner--was already down and dead. So I only had a limited amount of ammunition because he was carrying the ammo. It was his job to keep the gun supplied. He was back up the trail and by that time the firepower had subsided. So I went to treat the sergeant and worked on him forever.

What condition was he in?

He was very very dead. He took a round that went in underneath one arm and came out the other side under the arm. We were very, very close. I could cry about it right now. He was a very well respected man. I did not accept his death at all. I still have a hard time with it. I talked with his mother 3 weeks ago. But anyway . . .

So, you survived this situation but psychologically you were pretty damaged from all you had seen and been through. So by the time of the incident on the hill, you say that you were in pretty bad shape.

I was pretty numb to emotion. I didn't have any problem doing the job. I guess that was pretty obvious on that hill. That's probably why they thought I was a loose screw. I wasn't running around hurting people on purpose. But I was not afraid to take on the enemy.

So, the Silver Star came about as a result of the ambush on February 8th and the fact that you took over the M60?

I don't even remember how that citation even read. I knew nothing about it. I didn't know that I had been put up for it. Actually, I think the intelligence guys were the ones who initiated that thing. When we left to go on that patrol that day, I looked at these two Marine captains and they were standing there with their .45s and their bars on. I said, "I highly suggest that you take your bars off and put them in your pocket somewhere, or throw them on the ground. They're just a target."

And then I said, "And you're not really going out there with a .45, are you?"

"Yes. The Marines are here to protect me."

I laughed and walked off. These two guys walked out into this ambush with a .45 in their hands and a couple of magazines. As I walked away, the lieutenant looked at one of my Marines and said, "Who the hell is that?"

And he said, "Oh, he's our corpsman." It was kind of a joke.

When the crap hit the fan on February 8th, we had two guys who were sitting toward the rear; they weren't out on the dike yet. Both of them got it immediately. They were the first two hit and were both killed.

You say the range from where these NVA were was about 800 yards?

Eight hundred to a thousand.

That's a long way away.

That is a long shot.

And you say they were hitting everything they were aiming at.

They suspected that there was a battalion out there and I think a battalion at that point for NVA was anywhere from 250 to 300. We had no idea how many were over there but they were dug into the edge of that village, which was very covered up with vegetation and then long rice paddies all the way across to where we were. We were going to take a main dike out and then straight in to the middle of the village. Then we had a squad over on the right flank coming through a little waterway over there. They were wading through that waterway to come into the end of the village to back us up. They had not made it through the water yet because they had to go through up to their necks. And that's when the crap hit the fan. The enemy was not aware that they were coming in there.

What time of day was this?

Oh, probably about 10:30, 11:00 o'clock.

So it was very light, morning and . . .

It was fully light. Go out and see what's out there was the word.

And you found it.

Yeah, we found out.

How close was this ambush to Chu Lai where your base was?

Maybe 15 or 16 miles; I'm not sure. I wasn't real good knowing where I was. I knew where the sea was.

What was this operation called?

It didn't have a name. It was just an expeditionary patrol to go out and see what was there. After the initial firefight with the NVA, then came the Vietcong guys who tried to ambush us from the back, which was a joke. We had no additional injuries at that point.

Then we walked about a hundred yards and went across this hill. In the process, we walked into a mine field. I told you it was a bad day. We hit five mines before we got through there.

Anybody get hurt?

Oh, yeah. We didn't have much left by the time we got through there.

How did you extract yourself from the minefield without getting hurt? Was it pure luck?

No. By the grace of God, but I didn't know it then. First we had to take the wounded off the hill which was not too cool. You tried to look to see where the last man stepped and hoped there wasn't something under that. It's tricky business. You have to be very observant. The way we got off the hill was in the opposite direction that we came up it. Otherwise, we would have had to go way around the whole group of hills which were not very maneuverable. The

commanding officer turned around, looked at us, and he said, "I'm goin' off the top of this hill. Step where I step, and if I blow, leave me. Get to the bottom and get back." He then took off running down the side of that hill, jumping and leaping. And what was left did the same. It was kind of funny watching the intelligence guys go. They were rather disturbed and distraught.

Had they taken their bars off by this time?

Oh, yeah. They took my advice.

Of course, as a corpsmen, you probably learned well early in this Vietnam experience that you weren't carrying anything indicating that you were a corpsman.

I carried an M14, usually a couple of bandoliers of machine gun connected rounds because it was easier to carry, and usually 46 magazines in an ammo bag.

Were the magazines for your M14 or your .45?

Oh, hell, that .45 stayed on my rack. The best thing you could do with that was throw it at 'em. Don't get me wrong. I can shoot a .45, but in a firefight, a .45 is worthless. You can't hold a .45 for more than one shot. Rapid fire with a .45 is a joke.

So you felt a lot more comfortable with that M14.

I picked up my first M14 off a man who went down in "Operation Starlight." And he was pretty messed up. But when I put him on the chopper, he wasn't coming back. I knew the kid well and when I put him on the chopper, I reached over and grabbed his M14, his belt, and his magazines and I said, "I'll get one for ya."

He said, "Get one for me, Doc." I had no intentions of killing anybody. It was a matter of making him feel like his rifle was going to be put to good use.

If this ambush took place on February 8, 1966, when did Starlight take place?

Starlight was the end of August, first of September.

How did that transpire?

The outpost we were on was on the Bang Thong Peninsula. This was probably 15 to 18 miles from our area on the beach side. The Medal of Honor recipient, [SGT Robert] O'Malley, got his Medal of Honor on Starlight, I think. Or it may have been the amphibious assault called "Piranha." Piranha was where the picture was taken.

With the baby?

Yes. That had to have been late September or the first of October of '65 because the picture came out the third or fourth week of October. We were still basic operations from the rear and that's when we were put out on the Peninsula, as they called it there and given a 5-mile responsibility to patrol and keep the NVA away from the south end of the airstrip. There was a river behind us so it was a good area to defend.

We ran patrols right on through the end of February. We were down to about 112 men then. We had started with 246 or 247. Then they took us off the Peninsula and put us back in the rear.

So your relationship with the unit was pretty well cemented by this time.

Oh, yeah. These guys would have died for me . . . in a second. And, obviously, vice versa.

Tape 2

In our last interview, you had talked about the ambush on February 8th. I guess it was in March that you were involved in what was called “Indiana.” What do you remember about that?

Early in March, we moved back off the outpost, off the peninsula to the southern end of Chu Lai airfield and became part of the perimeter defense of Chu Lai. It was rather boring back there. We weren't getting much action. The 28 March event popped up as a rapid action deployment. Our intelligence indicated that there was a reinforced battalion of NVA in this valley and, if I have it correct, they took five or six companies. They put five on one end of the valley with the intention of pushing the enemy into a blocking force and they chose Charley Company to be that blocking force, even though it was 50 percent TO [table of organization]. We were the ones who had experience.

How many men did you have at that point?

About 112, 115.

After the combat you had seen, I would suspect that those men were kind of seasoned.

Well, we were the company that was most seasoned at that point and had seen most of the action in that area. When they brought us in, they dropped us at one end of the valley. The information indicated that the enemy was at the other end of the valley. The companies were to line up and start pushing them down the valley and we were to be the blocking force. We were trying to get into position to be that blocking force.

What was the terrain like in that vicinity?

Hills and valleys--like the rest of the terrain in that area. You got hills with rocks and grass, some of it tall grass, particularly on the parts of the hill that was not useable for raising rice and other crops. Basically, two hill lines running down with a valley in between. And the valleys differed. You'd have entrances and exits to them and one main valley where the rice paddies would run a long distance. Of course, water is key, so as the water came down from the mountains in the western area and down toward the sea. So it would run in that direction until the monsoons came up, and then it would kind of back up the other way. It was purely a matter of geography the way things were cut up there between the existing hillsides and the rice paddies.

Did they bring you in with choppers?

They brought us into what they called a “safe area” by chopper. Of course, the NVA was keeping an eye on the choppers and seeing where they were landing, etc. We thought we were a thousand or two thousand meters from the active force where they dropped in the rest of them. From what I understand, they gathered on the other end of the valley and set up a horseshoe shaped line. They hadn't even yet started down the valley when we got hit.

As we came in we were headed toward the blocking area where we were going to cross the rice paddy area and set up our fields of fire. We never quite made it there. We were working off two different maps from what I understand, and coordinating the two maps with each other had some problems.

In any sense, when we came up to this one hill, we were about a third the way around where we were going and someone noticed two uniformed Vietnamese at the top of a hill. It appeared to us to be a lookout situation. As soon as they saw them, they jumped up and ran across the top of the hill. CPL [Richard] Mayes and I just automatically took off around the left side of the hill and we met them on the back slope of the hill going down to the rice paddy. We opened up on them, just the two of us. We were out front. As soon as we opened up, all hell broke loose.

You had your M14 at this point?

You gotta be careful talking too much about that. Geneva Convention and all that.

I don't think the Geneva Convention really applied in a lot of the situations you got into.

None of them. I had a Marine general give me hell a couple of years ago about the situation. He was of the opinion that I broke the Geneva Convention constantly. We won't get into that. He was a well known general but he's no longer with us.

I believe the Convention stipulates that a corpsman is allowed to protect himself and his patient.

A personal weapon is a .45. And that's all they're supposed to carry. But they have been known to carry a number of different weapons, but generally, it's supposed to be a personal protection weapon. I've had guys who were over in Korea tell me that they carried carbines. As far as I'm concerned, carbines are worthless. I don't think they're very accurate but, worse than that, when you hit somebody with them you don't put 'em out. I saw a Marine take three carbine rounds in the bicep one time and he choked the guy to death who shot 'em. He was a big guy but that's not the point.

But as you are saying, you opened up on these two lookouts.

While Mayes and I were trying to take these two guys out, one of our sergeants said, "Don't fire. They might be ARVN." There was supposed to be ARVN in the area. Well ARVN wouldn't be running, right? As we opened up on them, they had AK-47s and they were in uniform. They did not have helmets so you really positively identify them as NVA other than the fact that they were carrying AK's. The ARVN wasn't supposed to be carrying AK's.

But we opened up on them and just as soon as we did, the village on the other side of the rice paddy, which was about 60 or 70 yards from where we were, absolutely lit up. You'd have thought it was Christmas time or something. There was an unsurmountable number of automatic weapons opening up on us. I distinctly remember Mayes looking over at me and then turning his head and charging the rice paddy. The remaining parts of 3rd Platoon, which wasn't a large number, were right behind us probably 25 or 30 feet as they came around the side of the hill and also commenced to charge the rice paddy.

Really, one of the keys to the battle, was the fact that these guys, instead of taking a defensive position, made it an offensive position. At that moment, Rick Mayes knew that he didn't stand a chance.

He was right beside you?
He was about 10 feet away.

And he decided that the best defense was just charging these guys.

With the experience we had had up to that point, and the number of firefights we had been in, it pretty much went hand in hand that your best way of survival is to charge them. Anything they didn't expect. In this case, it was overwhelming odds.

In whose favor?

In their favor. As far as the after action report is concerned, they estimated over a hundred North Vietnamese in that line in the village.

And you had how many out there?

At first there was just me and Rick.

So it was two against a hundred.

Yeah. Then behind us was another 12 or 14 of our guys spread out to some point. Rick and I worked together a lot in combat. Rick would say, "Doc!" And I'd just follow. We went out and the rest of the platoon was following us. The platoon sergeant was with the others near the rear. He did not have a lot of experience with firefights in Vietnam. He was very conservative.

Was the situation with you and Mayes a little out of the ordinary, for a corpsman to be up there almost at the point?

The point of the company was 1st Platoon and when we came up to that hill 1st Platoon was about a third of the way around the right side of the hill. The ambush had been set up so that they would let us walk into them. In other words, they would have annihilated 1st Platoon immediately had they gone another 150, 200 feet. They would have been in an open area so that the NVA would have chopped them into pieces.

So, when you and Mayes initiated the fight, you threw their plan off.

We upset their ambush. When the crap starts rolling, people get excited. This is my opinion, of course. When we went back over there in 2000, we got a lot of little tidbits of information. The people we ran into on March 28th was the same group we had fought on February 8th. These people had been watching Charley Company on the outpost for some time. They had been organizing and preparing themselves.

What happened after the village opened up on you?

Rick made it 30 or 40 feet in his charge and he went down immediately. Nothing hit me in the first barrage. It's kind of a miracle. The trees were falling; that's how much fire was going on. Your mind is kind of scrambled at that point. It's not what you were expecting, so to speak. It's an overwhelming situation. So, I took off after Rick and slid down behind him to see what I could do. He was pretty much out in the open. I knew it was bad but you do what you gotta do. It was obvious that he had numerous gunshot wounds all over him. I reached over and turned his head over trying to check his pupils. And that's when they got me and him. But he was finished at that point. And I was mad.

Where were you hit?

The left hand. My hand was on his head when they got both of us. We don't want to get too gruesome in this, do we?

No. Just tell me what you're comfortable with.

It kind of blew his head apart.

So now you're hit in the hand and quite close to the enemy.

At that point, I'm about 50 or 60 yards from the line of fire.

It's just you and him out there and the entire force of about 100 NVA shooting at you.

I and then the rest of 3rd Platoon coming up behind us. And that was only 15 or 20 guys max. The rest of the company was assaulting the top of the hill. The 2nd Platoon was spreading off to the left flank. The right platoon was charging around the right side of the hill. And, of course, we had upset the ambush so they could tell better where the enemy was. They ended up on the right side where there were two anti-aircraft guns sitting on top of this hill. They were hitting these guys with the anti-aircraft guns.

So they leveled these guns horizontally and they were using those.

They could see me on the forward slope of that hill. If 1st Platoon had walked on around that hill, they would have been able to get them, too. Of course the small arms fire would have been so close at that point, they would have been 35 or 40 yards from them at that point. So they had us in kind of a C-shaped ambush. That's kind of hard to get out of. There was nowhere to go and there was no cover. But we upset it before they actually got us into it.

So Rick went down and I had slid in behind him and was basically using him for protection. He was taking rounds and I used his body as a block. I noticed that machine gun fire was coming from the left of the rice paddy. There was a cane patch there. I saw the smoke coming from the cane patch so I tried to use the maximum amount of firepower to get in that cane patch. Of course, the other guys were coming behind me and they were going down just left and right. Some of them made it out into the rice paddy while I was firing. As I tried to back up, three of them were halfway across the paddy. One went down with multiple gunshot wounds, the other had a 3.5 rocket blown out of his hand. The projectile went through the rocket and the rocket went off but it didn't blow up. It went out the barrel.

Was this an RPG or what?

We didn't have what you know as RPGs. This was a 3.5 rocket, like a bazooka. As the Marines were charging this line, the rifleman in front and the ammo carrier for this 3.5 got hit several times halfway out in the rice paddy so they were down behind a crossing dike. The 3.5 guy raised up to fire his rocket into the hedge line and they hit his 3.5, going through the back. The 3.5 launcher tube is made out of aluminum. The electrical part of the charging mechanism had initiated and instead of the round just blowing up in the tube, which is your greatest fear, the 3.5 actually fired but didn't go where he had intended it to go. But it went out the barrel and over toward that area. It was just a miracle that it didn't blow up in the tube. He and the other two guys were pinned down out there in the middle of the rice paddy for 45 minutes or an hour with all this fire going both ways across them.

I emptied all but one magazine of mine and Rick Mayes' ammunition in this cane patch trying to take out the machine gun and I got it quieted down. Then I started firing at the hedge line across the rice paddy. Then I got down to one magazine. You always keep one magazine. I slapped it in and took off running toward the rear. I got about 35 or 40 feet back about the position I started in. I saw SSGT Ben Savage, our platoon commander laying over there. I turned to go after him when I got hit in the knee. That took me down.

I was still out in the open and they were ripping my ass up--rounds all around me. I took off over to him as soon as I recovered position from the knee injury. I got in behind Savage. He was similar to Rick Mayes. He had numerous wounds, more than three. His pupils were fixed and dilated when I got to him. There wasn't any sense in trying to move him. I threw his weapon into the bushes and grabbed his magazines and took off back over to the right, still on the forward flank but . . .

You had been shot through the knee at this point. Did you have some trouble running?

Yeah, but when there are people shooting at you you'll amaze yourself and just go. You don't have time to pay attention to it when rounds are hitting all around you.

I got over around a tree line perpendicular to the field of fire and tried to get a breath and some protection. I saw another guy laying back. I looked around to the right and they were still laying rounds around. I went to check him out and to this day I can't remember who it was. I was a little excited at that point. When I leaned over him, for some reason, I looked back. There was an NVA standing about 10 or 15 feet from me. I was squatted down with one knee on the ground when I turned and he shot me through the face with an AK. It moved me a good 6 or 7 feet. It's amazing what you can remember. I can remember the bullet coming in one side and going out the other. It's like stopping time.

Where did the bullet hit your face?

Went in the right side of my face. There's a process that connects your maxillary with your mandible. In that process there's a slight hole there between the process and the mandibular joint, where the muscle attaches. Well it went right through that hole on the right side of my face. I don't know whether my mouth was open or who knows. It then hit the high orbit in the maxillary through the eye orbit on the other side, and took part of the maxillary process.

You were out of the fight at this point?

No. All of it is very distinct memory. I remember thinking to myself, "I'm still alive." Of course, there was no hearing. My vision in the left eye was little or none. I realized that I'm laying there with my head down and realizing that my M14 is still in my right hand. Then I remember that this guy shot me and he's still got to be there. So I rolled over on my back and sure enough, he's still standing there looking at me. How much time went by, I have no idea, probably just seconds. I just rolled over and shot him a couple of times. Got him in the chest and upper thorax as he was moving away. An M14 will move you. And then I lay back down for a moment trying to get my bearings as to what was going on. The guy obviously came up out of a spider trap. He couldn't have been there otherwise. That was my only thought. He didn't come across that rice paddy and he wasn't standing there before. And I had just passed through

where he was standing. So it had to be a spider trap out there. I had seen them in spider traps before and how they work.

It became very obvious to me as a corpsman that my days are over. The blood and the swelling and the lack of hearing and vision were all pretty obvious. I felt like my head was literally falling apart. I didn't have any substantial holding power.

There's a big story in between but I probably shouldn't get into it.

You mean there's a story in between the time you were wounded and what?

There's so much of a buildup to the whole story in Vietnam. After February 8th I basically lost my belief in anything. As I lay there, I had one desire. I knew I was dying. I had no problem with death. I just asked the Lord to give me enough strength to finish my job. And He did so.

I rolled over and they started shooting at me again. I rolled over and pulled the guy I had been attending when I was shot to a little more safety and realized that he was finished. I still can't remember who he was and that bothers me. At that point, I started moving off to the right flank and heard the cry for corpsman down at the edge of the rice paddy. I couldn't see who it was so I followed the little tree line down, which wasn't much protection either. You gotta remember that I still had a hundred people shooting at me.

I assume that you're crawling at this point.

No, I was not crawling. I was up and moving. I got down to this guy and he was laying out in the open. He wasn't moving. He's got a through-and-through thigh wound in the left upper thigh. No bone involvement and obviously no big vessel involvement. At this point, I'm pissed. The damned rounds were coming all over me.

So, you said a few unkind words to him at this point.

I was ready to kill him myself. You have to understand personalities in combat. Some people think that if they get shot they're gonna die and others think that they can't die even if they get shot. This guy was a Marine, he knew how to do his job, and up to that point, he had functioned well. At this point he wasn't functioning. I tried to drag him--and I wasn't very strong at this point. I got to the 6 or 8 feet to the tree line and they were still shooting at both of us. They weren't hitting us but they were shooting at us. There must have been more than one of them; there were too many rounds to be coming from one weapon.

I stuck my rifle barrel out there to him and screamed at him, "Grab it! Grab it! Of course, I couldn't hear what he was saying. I pulled him into the tree line. I made my Marines carry their own bandages. This had happened many months before this. Each one took their little atropine syrette and package.

Do you mean morphine syrette?

Well, you had a nerve gas package that each of the Marines kept on their belt. It was a perfect fit for exactly two small battle dressings. At that point I was out. So I grabbed his packet and wrapped two of them on him, one on the entrance and one on the exit. This wound was so minor that the exit wound was not much larger than the entrance wound. This was a piss ant wound! And I was pissed off. But I wrapped his leg for him and tried to keep it as tight as I could without creating a tourniquet. I pulled him a little further into the tree line where he had some protection. At least they couldn't see him that well. And left him there.

SGT [Pedro] Padilla, who was 3rd Platoon sergeant, was almost to the other side of the rice paddy. He was actually on the edge of the other side of the rice paddy and probably 5 or 10 feet from their dug in positions. He was screaming and obviously had numerous wounds also. I saw him get hit when he entered the paddy . He crossed it anyway. He ended up throwing their grenades back at them for the rest of the battle. He's the only one who made it across that rice paddy and he got in their faces and taunted them a little bit, which helped.

The decision was, do I go after Padilla or not? I knew he needed me. I also knew that there was no way in hell I was going to make it across that rice paddy. What good would I be. To describe the thing, you're probably talking about four or five hundred rounds at a time hitting an area no bigger than a 70- by 30-square-yard patch of dirt. Most of those people over there were still alive unless I and some of our other guys killed some of them. They were still in their holes and still prepared to ambush us. And they were obviously loaded for bear or they wouldn't be there.

At this point, we hadn't at all affected them other than the fact that we had put them on the defense instead of the offense, an important point from the battle standpoint. The fact is that those guys were scared to death of Charley Company. And they had a damn good right to be. A North Vietnamese Army doctor who was captured later said, "With the army, we could always figure out what they were going to do next. Those damned Marines, you never knew what they were going to do." This was a pertinent point. When they went into a firefight, the first thing the guys in Charley Company typically did was to charge, not try to take position and figure it out. They learned that their best defense was a hell of an offense. We always came out ahead by doing so. And that day was the same thing, even though most of them were already dead by that time.

So, what to do about Padilla? That was my decision of a lifetime. Do I go after my sergeant, my Marine, my friend--a man I had survived 9 months with. I had to make my decision based on sound facts. And the sounds facts were that there was no way in hell that the NVA would let me cross that rice paddy in my condition.

So I took off back to the hedge line and tried to follow it over to the right side of the area where I found numerous other dead men. I found a corpsman who was laying in a washout off the top of the hill. It was probably 4 or 5 feet wide at some points and probably 2 feet deeper than the other terrain. People had obviously been moving through there. The corpsman was laying in the middle of this wash about halfway down. I went up the hill to get him. The NVA were pumping rounds around and he was laying in the open. When I got to him he had a grazing head wound.

The bullet had not entered the skull. I couldn't find any other wounds on him at all but he was unconscious. The round had grazed the left temporal area and penetrated the skin. The bone was showing but it didn't appear there was any obvious fractures. He had a pulse and he was breathing. He was just knocked out. His helmet was off. I pushed him over to the side of the bushes where this gully was washed out. He was also carrying a rifle so I stuck his rifle off to the side and grabbed his ammunition since he didn't need it. I didn't even wrap his wound because there was really no bleeding. There was not a whole lot I could do for him at this point.

By this time the fight had been going on about an hour or an hour and a half. I went back down the hill toward the rice paddy to see if there were guys down there who might be salvageable. I got to a couple of guys and then one of the men who was in the CP group suddenly showed up and started dragging these guys back up to the command post. I think I knew who that was. SGT Mack Feerick was the guy. He was down there on that lower level.

He got the guy with the thigh wound out. The guys who came out of the rice paddy he helped get out later. And we got the corpsmen out. I still don't know who he was; he was new to the company. I think his name was Bennett but I have not been able to find him.

It was beginning to be dusk by this point. Mack was down there dragging them and there was somebody else but I can't remember who that was. They were pulling these guys out. Some of the them were dead. Some were alive.

Actually, I didn't do that much treatment. The citation says that I was responsible for saving lives that day. That's hard for me to be convinced of. I was probably more responsible for saving lives by killing enemy troops than I was being a corpsman. And that bothers me.

I went down there and started clearing hedgerows. I walked along with my ammunition and fired where I thought there might be spider traps because I knew they were there.

So, you went back down the hill and began shooting at the enemy.

Try to picture four tiers. The farmers keep their rice paddy under water. Then they have a second level where they grow something like a tapioca plant or a sweet potato type plant which they raise on this dry ground. And the third tier was a grassy area where they would graze a cow or something. The top of the hill was uninhabitable. It would be too rocky. The command post was on top of the hill and the machine guns were set up on top of the hill circling the hill trying to find the right place to fire.

When I got back toward the edge of the rice paddy, I looked up and saw a jet come across the top of us. As he swooped through there, the anti-aircraft guns were firing but missed him. I looked back and either another jet or the same one napalmed the other side of the rice paddy. Napalm is a fuel that you light and it kind of rolls. First I saw the jet and then it was all over. This was really close stuff. This guy was maybe a hundred feet or less off the ground.

How good was his aim?

His aim was about as good as anybody could be. Every time jets had tried to come in from high, the anti-aircraft guns were firing at them. So they came in down the valley and just popping right up over the top of the hill. By the time you knew they were coming, it was all over. We had some great pilots over there. I saw the napalm leave the jet in a canister and immediately I stuck my head down in the mud and the blood as the fire came rolling across the rice paddy like a sea fog rolls across the land. It burned out very quickly. We were getting the flame part rather than the fuel. The napalm shook up the NVA pretty bad even though it did not take them out. They were all dug in on the other side. I'm sure it got some of them and certainly quieted them down.

I started working myself back toward the original area I was in, probably 30 or 40 yards back to the left. I knew there had to be guys out there, although I didn't find any. I saw a nice little rock sitting in the middle of this opening about 8 or 10 inches above ground right next to the rice paddy. I remember what one of my old sergeants, who was dead at that point, had said. "Nobody can see where one flash came from. Switch it back to single fire . . . one at a time."

Moonlight was coming from behind our hill flashing toward the enemy, which was an ideal situation because the moonlight reflected on them rather than on us. I started picking them off one by one. Any time I could identify a position or a noise--and I must have been hearing at that time because I could hear them chattering. Padilla was still alive over there so I had to be back toward the middle area. He was taunting them.

What was he saying to these people?

He was a Mexican guy. He would scream at them in English and Spanish, anything to mess up their minds. They got tired of throwing grenades at him because he'd throw them back.

What kind of range are you talking about now as far as you're concerned? You're seeing these guys and your picking them off with your M14.

I'm talking about 35 or 40 yards.

What about the illumination? Is it after dusk?

It got dark real quick over there. When I got down to that rock, it was still dusk and you could see in front of you and across the rice paddy. You just couldn't see them. The moonlight was better than dusk. You could see images. They would pop up out of their holes and you could see their little hats and sometimes their body. I had one good eye left--my shootin' eye. I just lay behind this little rock right out in the open. I remember I counted my rounds when I went down there; I had 32 rounds left. So I switched over to semiautomatic and I lay my rifle up on the little rock and zeroed in where I thought they were and waited for one of them to identify himself. And I'd pop one and then the war started all over again. Five thousand rounds flying all over the place.

One of the Marines had been hit by an anti-aircraft round in the right humerus. The thing went through his arm and did not blow up. It's an explosive round. It went through his arm and blew up on the hill behind him. That was the only wound he got out of it. He was back up there at the beginning of the second plateau. I never knew he was there at all. When I saw him again a couple of years ago he said, "Yeah, Doc, I knew where you were, you bastard. Every time the fire got down close enough that I thought I might be able to slip out of there, you started the damn firefight all over again. I thought I might shoot you myself but I wasn't worth a crap with my left hand. What the hell were you doin' down there anyway?"

"Havin' fun." Between us, it was kind of funny. You have to look at the psychology of the thing. I was a dead man and I knew it. There was little chance that I was going to walk out of that place, just from the injuries.

You figured you had nothing to lose?

I had given that part up back when I had the head injury. When I was taking care of that corpsman, they obviously saw me and, I suspect, that's when I got the fourth wound. I don't really know for sure. The bullet slit my scrotum a little bit on one side, went in the inguinal area, and came out the right buttocks--and fairly high up, too. It didn't hit a damn thing. How it got through there without serious damage is just God's grace. You would think it would have hit the pelvis or one of the major arteries or veins. It didn't touch a thing.

Keeping count, what are we up to as far as wounds?

That's just number four. I only knew about three at that point. I was back here in the States before I knew about the last one.

You're down there taking pot shots at them and it's after dusk and you're using the illumination of the moon to pick these guys off, and starting firefights every time you do it. How long did this go on?

Time is a relative thing. To me it seemed like all night. According to my CO, it was about 1500 when this whole thing started. In late March it was getting dark around 1700 or 1800.

This is one helluva long firefight you were having.

This was a very long firefight. The longest one I've ever been in for sure. If you're in a 5-minute firefight, that's a long time. Do you know how many rounds you can expend in 5 minutes? If you carry five magazines on your body and can fire 550 rounds a minute out of an M14, you've just fired all your magazines. You've got to be careful **not** to fire all your ammunition.

Wasn't it pretty difficult to hold an M14 on a target when you were on full automatic with that recoil kicking the muzzle up?

Well, you learn to be better with it. At 50 yards I could take a 14 x 14 target and put two or three rounds into it from the hip. You cannot hold an M14 at the shoulder and fire automatic fire and keep it within a very close area. Some are better than others. I've seen guys who could hold and control them. Automatic fire is not the most efficient way to shoot. It's good for scrambling them and making them get down while you get a better position or a better line on them. That's a mistake that almost everybody makes in combat at one time or another. You're so excited at that point, you're not thinking well. You have to keep the damn thing off automatic. You usually traveled with it on automatic because of the potential of close ambush so that you could scramble 'em. You could put out 10 or 15 rounds in a burst immediately, and if you can get anywhere close to somebody--3 or 4 feet within a human being, that guy is not going to be standing or sitting there firing at you. You're going to shake him up. An M14 is a bad piece of equipment. If you hit his earlobe with an M14, you're going to put him out of commission temporarily. An AK is not nearly the weapon an M14 is. It does not have the same knockdown power even though it's a lethal weapon.

What is happening with the firefight at this point, as far as you were concerned?

I don't know. It might have been 30 minutes, an hour, I just don't know.

Was SGT Padilla still yelling at these guys?

When I got down there he was. I remember three of them that I got. One came up out of his hole and the light reflected off him. I have no idea where I hit him but when I got him, the two guys beside him just jumped out of their holes and started running like hell the other way. Then I tried to taunt them a little bit. Then the firefight started all over again. This is not a good example of what a corpsman is supposed to be doing.

Well, I think you were trying to save your own life. You're allowed to do that. These guys are out to kill you and you're just trying to get them before they get you. At this point, the rules of Geneva have gone out the window.

I was a dead man who was doing what felt good. This statement gets taken improperly and I've used it before. How do you kill a dead man?

You had already ruled yourself dead.

I moved around there on that slope with insurmountable odds against me. They shot at me. They hit me a few times but, considering the odds, they weren't very good, were they?

Either they weren't very good or you were better than they were.

I was not the fastest running back; I had too many rounds in me. One of the guys later said, "Doc, you were probably in such a stupor that they misinterpreted your every move." That may be worth considering. One of them said I looked like I was walking across there like I was on a Sunday afternoon stroll. "Doc, they were shooting all over the damn place and they couldn't hit you."

Did you ever contemplate being captured by the enemy?

The guys in the company had an agreement among us that if we saw someone about to be captured, to take him out.

Rather than let him fall into the hands of the enemy.

You would want him to go with dignity. In their hands there was no dignity. That was the way we thought about it anyway. I'm not discrediting people who got captured. They went through hell. It would be pretty hard to maintain your dignity as a prisoner of war. I wasn't about to let those bastards get me. I'd take myself out first. Dying is not so bad, you know.

Well, you were pretty close to being there. You ought to know.

Living is much harder than dying.

When did this nightmare finally end?

I know that I had expended 20 rounds. I had 30 rounds left when I went down there. When I changed magazines I crawled back off the little slope there. It was dark and they couldn't see me. On the right side of the hill, the terraces were too high to climb so I went back around to the left side where I had originally come down. I got over the first terrace pretty easily. It was probably a couple of feet tall. I got up to the second terrace going to the third level and it was about 4 ½ to 5 feet tall. I just couldn't get over it. I kept trying to crawl up it but just didn't have it.

All of a sudden, a hand reached down and grabbed me and pulled me up over the thing. I started walking back toward the top of the hill. It was my commanding officer. He said that he had no idea who I was. He said that the blood and the mucus . . . It looked like one of these guys with a beard all the way down to his knees. This was just this slime hanging off of the front of me and blood everywhere.

We got back to the command post. I know only from them telling me that at 11 o'clock that night there were 200 rounds of ball ammunition left and 2 grenades within the company. That ain't much. And we had not been able to be resupplied because of the anti-aircraft guns.

It was about 3 o'clock in the morning before they finally got to us because they couldn't move through that valley very easily at night. They got one chopper in at dusk on the backside of the hill with ammunition but it wasn't much. That's what I've been told.

You were up at the CP at this point?

They got me up there with the CP group. The gunnery sergeant was running the triage back there. They had a chopper in there and he kept asking me questions. I was non-functional

at that point. He'd describe the wounds and I'd tell him what to do and he'd try to get these guys out on the chopper. He says I refused to evacuate but I don't remember anything. All I remember is him telling me, "I got a guy with this and this . . ." And I'd ask him about the bleeding. "Has he got a pulse? Is he breathing? Is he awake? Is he conscious? Where's the bleeding? Is it pulsing; is it oozing?"

This guy's not a corpsman; he's just . . .

He's a Marine gunnery sergeant. After that he became the number four Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps. Saw him a few weeks ago.

I have no idea when they evacuated me. They don't remember either. They put me on a chopper somewhere near daylight. They did get some reinforcements in the middle of the night, they tell me, but I don't remember any of it.

From there I ended up in B-Med Battalion. From there I went to Alpha-Med Battalion.

What did they do for you in B-Med?

I remember the lights and the tables. They tell me that they put me with the dead when I got there. I don't know this; it's just what I'm told. Obviously, I didn't look too salvageable. And that's the right thing. When you're in that type of a mass casualty situation, you take the ones who are most salvageable first.

I remember the inside of the treatment suite because I recall the lights and stuff. I was laying over on the side. I kept asking this guy for water. Then I gave him an upchuck of a big glob of blood. He was a third class corpsman. I think he did a trach on me to keep me from drowning in my own blood. I remember nothing after that until I was leaving Alpha Med.

Where was B Med located?

Probably at Chu Lai. Alpha Med was in Danang.

You remember that little incident at B Med and you think you had a trach done on you by the corpsman.

I remember giving him this glob of blood. When he finally gave me some water, I broke it loose. And that's when they did the trach. I remember them cutting but nothing after that. When I was leaving Alpha Med in Danang, somebody woke me up. I assume it was the doctor. I remember he was talking to me. He said, "You're gonna make it," or something to that effect. "We wish you well," or something, and that was about it. The next time I woke up I was in the Philippines. I had no vision. I was able to hear at that point.

There were a tremendous number of psychological effects out of this thing. I saw the guy who took the thigh wound as I was lying in the hallway fixing to get on the airmobile on the way out of the Philippines. He was walking beside me and I remember trying to reach out and grab him. I didn't get him.

I guess Padilla didn't make it.

No. They didn't get him out of there until the next morning. They said he had more rounds in him than they could count. There's a hero. There were a bunch of heroes out there that day and one of 'em wasn't me. My story is probably bullshit compared to their's.

In the last interview, we left you after you had fought that mother of all firefights and you were pretty badly banged up.

This was 28 March.

Yes. We had been evacuated on the helicopter. You had wounds you didn't even now about. After you left Vietnam, you went to Clark in the Philippines.

I was at Clark for . . . I don't have any idea how long. It may have been days or weeks. I've always been interested to find out. I don't really know what mental state I was in, whether I was purposely put out or whether I was comatose. I can't tell that from any records I have.

What's the first thing you do remember?

I remember awakening at Clark when they were working on my leg, but I didn't have any vision. I had hearing and it was momentary--probably a minute and then I don't remember anything. They were amazed that I was awake from their comments.

I was this in an Air Force hospital?

Yes. I was in a treatment room and I remember waking up. They were talking about the knee. I have no idea what they were doing to the knee. I awoke another day which happened to be the day they shipped me out.

So time was irrelevant; you don't know how much time had passed. You were just out of it.

I've always wanted to find out from records, if possible, from 28 March. Where was I? I was told that I was at B Med Battalion first and then went to A Med Battalion. From there I know that I went to Clark. From Clark to some Air Force hospital in Illinois; I have no idea where.

Probably Scott Air Force Base. That's where the evacuation flights came in.

That may well be. I remember being on a very large aircraft going into Scott, if that's where it was. I remember that part of the trip, getting on the aircraft in the Philippines and I had fairly decent vision off and on. That's when a colonel came on and pinned the Purple Heart on me.

Did you have any reaction to that?

It was kind of a joke because he couldn't look at me. He took one look at me, turned his head, and pinned it on my pajama top.

Did they put you in the hospital at Scott?

We were in the hospital there and I woke up on the floor. It looked like a family practice clinic or an emergency room or something. There were civilians around and I was on the floor on a stretcher. What did I want at that point? I wanted a cigarette.

Had you been a smoker before?

Oh yeah. With the exception of about 3 years just before Nam. Cigarettes developed a tremendous psychological pleasure in combat. I stopped for about a year and a half before I went to Vietnam. When I got there, I found no booze, no women, no food. But a cigarette was wonderful. The psychological pleasure you get out of a cigarette.

As you said, there were not a lot of other pleasures to be had so you had to grab whatever you could. So you're there on the floor of this treatment center and you want a cigarette. Did you ask for one?

Here's this poor lady sitting on a bench with her child about 6 or 8 feet from me kind of staring at me. You can imagine my head was three times normal size. I didn't look too pretty. Here I am with a tracheostomy. My left hand is bound up and tied down. My left leg is casted. I'm laying there very uncomfortably and people are going in and out. I took my right hand and put it over my trach and said, "Ma'am." I liked to have scared her to death. "Have you got a cigarette?" She was about to pass out. She gets a cigarette out of her purse and kind of hands it over to me. "M'aam, have you got a light?" She wasn't gonna light it for me. Instead, she handed me a pack of matches. I've got one hand and a trach in. You cannot suck air in through your mouth if the trach is open. So I take this match and fold it over in the old style, and strike it with one hand. I go to draw back on the cigarette and I can't light it. So I put that match out. I strike another one and reach down and cover the trach with my little finger, hold the match up and light the cigarette with the other one.

This must have been something to see. Was she watching this whole thing?

Yes.

She must have been totally horrified.

Very, very horrified. I then handed the matchbook back to her. I was holding the cigarette and matches in the same hand. I reached over and put the cigarette in my mouth and took my hand to cover the trach and took a drag on the cigarette. And then I took my hand off the trach and exhaled. This little curlicue of smoke came out the trach. And that's where she lost it. She grabbed her kid and took off. But that cigarette was so good.

Then along came some Air Force nurse and grabbed my cigarette. You have to keep in mind that I still had a head full of blood in my hair because they didn't want to wash around the wounds.

You hadn't been cleaned up by this time?

I know there had to have been a significant amount of time because I don't remember it. But there was a significant amount of time before B Med and Jacksonville, maybe 3 or 4 weeks. I woke up that next day in that dispensary and don't remember anything in between. I could see out of one eye and I could smell. So the swelling was going down; the olfactories are beginning to work again. I could smell the rancid blood, which is not a pleasant smell. And I decided that I wanted my hair washed. I motioned the nurse to come over. Actually, it was an Air Force medic who came over. "Wash my hair." He looked at me and said, "I'll have to check with the nurse."

So, he went off to check with the nurse. She came back over and said, "Absolutely not! We cannot get this area wet." She was like Nurse Ratchet, which I can understand. At the same time, you're not accustomed to having what you want.

She walked off and was gone for a little while and then came back. I said, "Ma'am, would you wash my hair?"

"No. We can't wash it." And I could keep smelling myself. It was not cool. I waited a little while and looked at this Marine beside me and said, "I'm going to that bathroom." It was probably 25 or 30 feet from me.

Let me get this right. You were on a stretcher on the deck at this point?

No. I was in a bed by this time in a ward with a bunch of injured guys. I don't remember anything after her taking my cigarette and the next morning. When I decided I was going to wash my hair, I maneuvered off the bed. And that was the first time I stood up.

You had a cast on the leg with the knee injury?

I had a cast on the knee and the left hand was also casted. The corpsman saw me standing up by the side of the bed and he ran over saying, "You can't get up!" And he slipped me back into bed. And I'm thinking, "Wait till he disappears."

So I waited a little while and then slipped out of bed and began going toward the head. I'm going to wash my hair. All of a sudden the nurse turned around and saw me walking across the floor with great difficulty. She called two Air Force medics and they ran over. One grabbed me by one arm and one grabbed me by the other. All of a sudden, I turned around and there were about five Marines standing there that had been blown all to hell. And they were saying, "Leave him alone!" And they said, "Doc, where do you want to go?"

"To the head." And this lady was just having a seizure.

Was this was the nurse who grabbed your cigarette?

Yes. I'm sure she was a good nurse but she just didn't understand the psyche of a man coming out of combat. The Marines then helped me into the bathroom. And I sat there with my head washing this crap out and they were helping me wash that blood out of my hair. We were being very careful not to get the bandages on my face wet.

All of a sudden, two APs [Air Police] showed up with a high ranking officer. I think he was a colonel. By that time, I was on my way back to the bed. And they came storming in. The Marines were standing there looking at them as if to say, "Do you have a problem?"

It would seem that the problem was already over.

The problem was over but one of the APs grabbed my shoulder. The Marines just glared at him and he probably figured that he really didn't need to help me. He took his hand off me and they helped me over to the bed and helped me in.

Psychologically, you must have felt a lot better being clean.

Oh, yeah. It was tremendous. Those Marines took care of me and they weren't even my guys. They just knew I was a corpsman who was shot all to hell and that's all they needed to know.

How long were you in this Air Force hospital?

I think about 3 days; that's the best I could come up with.

Had they provided any kind of treatment or was it just maintenance?

I don't remember any treatment at the Air Force base at all. They'd come to the bed and do vital signs and what have you. I don't remember them removing any bandages or doing anything at all. Then we got aboard a smaller aircraft and headed to Jacksonville.

I don't remember landing in Jacksonville. The first thing I remember is waking up in a bed at the old hospital at NAS JAX. Standing by my side was a thoracic surgeon who I got to know very well. He was removing the bandages and going over all the wounds. It was

obviously a check-in kind of exam. And he was reading the chart and going from one wound to the other. I had this Penrose through my face from one side to the other.

What's a penrose?

A little piece of rubber tubing that's porous.

Like a drain.

Yes. It allows the wound to drain. And he looks at this thing and says, "That's worthless. I'm going to take this tube out, son. Bear with me. It might hurt a little bit." Then he reached over and grabbed one end of it and snaps it from one side to the other.

This was going right through your head--the track of the bullet wound, right?

Yeah. Oh, it hurt a little bit. I had hold of a piece of his arm with my good hand, obviously squeezing the crap out of it. And he said, "You can let go now."

He ended up to be a really neat doctor. I worked with him when I was at the hospital later. He was very interested in trauma--thoracic wounds, which was why he was there. He said, "I could be making some money on the outside but instead I'm here trying to learn all about things that aren't written in the books."

I'll bet that what he saw in you wasn't written in the books.

Well, my wounds weren't his bailiwick. He was looking for thoracic stuff but he happened to be the guy on call. Later on, I worked with him down in surgery. In those days, they used the people on the wards to work. And I happened to be a corpsman so I was helping treat other people and working with doctors.

But at this stage of your recovery, you weren't in any condition to be helping anybody.

No. That was some time later--a significant time later.

What happened after he removed the drain?

A little bit of blood but no big deal. The ENT guy did an evaluation several days later and decided to "let God do his work. And if He doesn't do a good job, we'll see what we can do."

So he figured that it was best to leave you alone and let you heal.

That's exactly what it was.

How was your vision at this stage?

It probably took about 4 or 5 weeks to start getting my vision back. I had loss of hearing; I had no smell. I had no vision and then the vision started coming back. When I was in Jacksonville, I could see pretty well out of the right eye. The left eye was a total blur but the swelling was still pretty high.

How badly had that left eye been injured? You had said the bullet had gone through the orbit.

The bullet didn't go through the orbit. It hit the base of the skull and comminuted the base of the skull and both eye orbits.

So those skull bones were fractured.

Right.

Both eye orbits were fractured but the eyeballs themselves were unhurt.

Right. It was the surrounding trauma that caused the vision problem. By the time I got out of the hospital, I was back to about 20-30 vision and within a couple of months it was back to 20-10, 20-15.

That's amazing.

Too bad it didn't stay that way. I got old.

What about your other injuries. You told me last time that there was a fourth bullet wound that wasn't found originally. Did they find it there at JAX?

Yes. I was in bed at NAS JAX. I thought I had urinated or messed on myself. I felt something wet down in the bed. A nurse came by and I said, "What is this?" She rolled me over and said, "It looks like a bullet wound. I wonder where the other side is?" That's when she started grappling around my groin and abdomen. The bullet had kind of cut the scrotum on the right side, went in the groin, and came out the rear end. But it didn't hit anything.

What did they do for that wound?

Nothing. They cleaned it up and put a bandage over it and let it heal.

Usually with those through-and-through wounds, they usually find them a lot sooner and they begin debriding them. But in your case, I suspect, if it hadn't gotten infected by that point, it wasn't going to get infected.

Right. I've never had any problem with it. I never knew it was there until it started seeping. They shot some films to see if there were any pelvic fractures but it had missed the ischium, the pelvis, and came out the buttocks and hadn't done any damage at all.

You're kind of a walking textbook in yourself. Every doctor in the hospital had a chance to learn something on you.

The orthopods and the ENT guys; that's about it. There was some wound repair on the knee. They decided not to try and do that voodoo plastic surgery thing.

Let's review this thing for a minute. You have the head wound and they decide to leave that one alone and let nature take its course. And you have your knee injury. What did they do for the knee?

Prior to getting to NAS, they had debrided the knee and removed part of the meniscus that was hanging there. The sartorius had retracted and the medial quad was mostly severed but not totally. What do you do except close off vessels and what have you? I obviously lost some veins in there but didn't lose any arteries. The arteries are more posterior to the knee. We continued to scrape the wound. You basically went in there with a scrub brush and a scalpel and scraped the wound and let it granulate out. They wanted to build up some degree of mass around that tissue area so you didn't have just skin covering the ligaments and the tendons. From the

time we started scraping it, it took 6 or 8 weeks. We'd go down every day. I did most of the work because it hurt the surgeon more than it hurt me. I finally told him one day, "Why don't you just give me a pair of gloves and let me do this and you can watch."

He said, "Gladly. At least you know how deep we can go without hurting you." And that was true. We'd take saline and wash it off, then scrub a little more. I'd scrub the exudate off the outside so I got blood coming to the top so it would continue to granulate. We let the hole granulate in with tissue and then they took me down to surgery and undermined the skin all around it, pulled it over to close it, wired it together, and left a drain in.

What kind of mobility did you have in that knee at this point?

I was working the knee even when the wound was open trying to keep the scar tissue--the granulation--keep the muscles and everything loose in the granulation. That was probably the most painful thing out of all of it--continuing to keep it broken loose from the scar. I was under physical therapy on that knee. I was pushing like 145 pounds with the right and 30 something with the left when we started. I was pushing 160 on the left leg when I quit and 145 with the right.

Wow! That's incredible.

A lot of it was attitude.

I was going to say that your attitude at this point must have been pretty positive to have built yourself back up like that.

The doctors, in general, like to look for the weakness. "You're not gonna ever have this back like you're supposed to have it, etc."

And you wanted to prove them wrong.

True. The sartorius was gone, which people tend to miss. But the orthopod said to me, "Look, if you work at it hard the way you're working at it, and you're not going to know you're missing that sartorius. You're never gonna be a quarterback or a linebacker in football. Because if you take off running and you go to twist, you're gonna find out that you don't twist too good. But other than that, I don't see any problem with getting a hundred percent out of it. You're on your way." So I just kept on pumping.

I think keeping the tissue separated from the granulation was probably part of the key because you had to overdo it. The musculature built back up very well. Of course, it had been pretty massive before. I kind of looked like two legs walking around anyway. At 140 pounds and two huge legs, if you took a full-length picture, the first thing you'd notice was, "Geez, this guy's got big legs." This had all resulted from humping hills in Nam.

So, you never really lost any of that muscle after you had been injured.

No. I still have a very good leg and a very good knee, other than the lack of circulation below the knee. I've got blood going down; I just don't get it back up quite as well.

Does that mean you have trouble walking?

No. I get swelling of the ankle because I can't get the blood up much. So if I'm on it a lot and use it a lot, I get edema on the ankle.

Now what was the deal on your hand?

There were multiple fractures of the proximal phalange on the left. The joint itself was gone. The bullet blew the joint out. It was the ring finger on the left. Initially, they wanted to take the finger off because they said it was going to be stiff and it would just end up with a contracture. The only real treatment that was done to it was done before I ever got back to Jacksonville. They had tied the tendon back together, stuck a brace on it, and later casted it so that I could get healing. They sewed up one side and left the other side open. The tissue healed and the tendon actually healed into the scar tissue so that the tendon wouldn't move. So I had a stiff finger with a contracture at the end. They told me that the only way I was going to get rid of the contracture was to force it. So we tried taping it back which didn't help. I walked around most of the day with my right hand pulling my left finger.

When you say most of the day, was this for one day?

No. This was every day. I just worked on trying to undo the contracture.

Were you able to finally do it?

Oh, yeah. It wasn't a big problem. The joint itself was a problem. They wanted to take the finger off because they felt like it would be in my way. I asked the doc, "Is there any difference between taking it off now or later?"

"Yes. I won't be here."

And I said, "Good!" So, I kept working on the joint and it wasn't working. I got good and drunk one night and I broke that sucker. I broke it loose. The bony pieces healed together so the joint didn't move.

So you broke that joint again?

Yeah.

How did you do that?

With my right hand.

So you were drunk and just didn't give a damn. You just grabbed it and forced it.

I worked on it for a long time trying to get it loose. It was extremely painful, to say the least. Now I can feel pressure but I can't feel heat or pain. When I broke it lose, it was sore back in the hand pretty badly, but the rest of the finger was fine and the color was pretty reasonable so it had good arterial and venous supply to it. I'm looking at it now and the little finger doesn't quite join right, but nobody would notice it. It's a good hand and it works.

And you can grasp things pretty easily with it?

Oh, yeah. I've got full use of it. It's kind of hard to catch a fast baseball in it but I can do without that.

How many months were you in the hospital?

I think I got shipped over to NAS to partial duty sometime in September or October, about 6 months or so after I was injured. They shipped me over to NAS JAX dispensary at that point.

**During all the time you were physically recovering, what was your emotional state?
How were you feeling about life in general?**

That's a book in itself. The hardest part was the nerve loss of the face. Even at that point, I still had a dragging eye. The left cheek, tongue, and eyelid tended to hang. You had funny reactions to smiling and chewing, because the nerve had not recovered.

Like Bell's Palsy?

More like a stroke victim. I slobbered a lot. I didn't have control of my lip on that side and it tended to let the saliva out. It was rather embarrassing at times. The ENT guy said, "We can go in there and try to find the nerve, but it's probably too late, if it is severed. My best bet is that it's not severed but just restricted and I think you'll be better off doing nothing than doing something. I base that on the fact that we don't know where things are in there. If you had a normal face without all the scar tissue, we would know where things were. But if I cut your face, I don't where the nerves are."

So, the normal anatomy is not normal anatomy anymore.

Right. The jaw would not close at that point. They sent me down to dental and the guy filed my teeth down, which was the worst possible thing he could do. I lost all the dentin on the tops of my teeth--all the protective covering. But the jaw would sublux very easily. You could be talking or trying to eat or bite down on something and the mandibular joint would sublux on me. This was because of the change of muscle, and there was probably a nerve problem associated with it, too. What I did then was take a bunch of tongue blades. You start with one or two or three. There were several months there that had I had maybe three-eighths of an inch opening in the mouth because the scar had retracted the muscle tissue. And I kept working six, seven, eight tongue blades. I just reached in there and pried it open. By the time I went to partial duty, I had fairly good function other than the subluxation.

Has all that resolved itself over the years?

I can sublux it myself. You know how dentists tend to reach into your mouth and start working before they talk to you? Or else they want you to talk back while they've got your mouth open and they've got their fist in it. The first time my civilian dentist reached in with his thumb and grabbed my jaw to pull it down, he pulled it down and the sucker subluxed on him. You should have seen the look on his face. And he backed off and I'm waving at him. I worked it around and it snapped back in. He said, "My God, why don't you tell me these things?"

I said, "Why don't you give me a chance?" It's a little sore when you do that and I don't normally do it. In general, it rarely happens any more and it's fine.

How's your vision?

My vision's good. With glasses, the left eye is kind of weak to sunlight. For the first 10 or 15 years it was a little bit of a problem. If I went outside and stayed there, it would turn red. But in the past years it really hasn't given me any trouble at all.

Was there any scarring on your face that you had to deal with?

Just the scarring itself from the exit wound. Everyone always wants to fix it for me. I have a good friend who is a plastic surgeon. He's been trying to fix it for 30 years. "Why don't you come down. We'll fix that thing up real good." Thank you but no thank you.

So, physically, you were well on your way to recovery. But how were the emotional aspects of the recovery?

I had difficulty. A lot of aggression. As far as my wounds were concerned, the facial part started recovering . . . It doesn't take too long for you to try to accept it. "I got a dragging lip and if you don't like it I'll punch your ass out." At that point, I was 22 years old and women look at you and say, "Um." Well, finally you get an attitude, "Well, I don't give a shit what you think." And when you get that attitude, all the girls wanna to come to you."

I'll have to try that when I get a chance.

I often think about these kids and what they call an attitude. I asked this girl out one night on a date and she looked at me and said, "I wouldn't go anywhere with you." I said, "That's your loss." As I walked off, I was thinking, "Why should I worry about this? If they want to go, fine, if they don't, fine." And from that time on, I just didn't worry about it. From that point on, I found out that it was my attitude they looked at. If they thought they were going to have fun, they'd go.

How long were you at NAS?

Probably 3 or 4 months before I went on detachment to Europe.

I don't understand. How did you get to Europe?

I was attached to VAP-62, which was an aerial photography squadron as a corpsman.

So you had returned to full duty?

I was attached to that squadron on partial duty. They attached the corpsmen out to the various units and then you went TAD to the dispensary because they didn't do anything in the hangars. I never even met the guys in the hangar until I got ready for detachment.

So what's the deal on your deployment to Europe?

We went to Rota first, which was actually an Air Force base, but the Navy was using it. Then we went to Norway and flew over Russia every night and took pictures. Then we went to Iceland for about 7 days.

Psychologically, the key was that I was a corpsman. However, I was still taking care of my Marines.

But after the hospital, you weren't with the Marines anymore. Your were back in the Navy.

No. But the Marines are my guys.

So, psychologically, you're still with the Marines even though you're back in the Navy again.

Right. In the hospital, you're the corpsman. You're the guy they would confide in. They would come down to my bed, which I was unable to leave, and ask me questions about their situation before they would go to the doctor or nurse. Because I was their Marine corpsman, they trusted me and nobody else. Trust is a big problem when you come out of combat. In other words, "Those people don't understand." A lot of their problems were in their

head, mental problems they didn't want to admit to. When I went on liberty, I went with the vets. We slept together. We ate together. We went on liberty together.

Those guys I hung around with were seven of the first guys back. By sticking with those guys and being their doc, we were known in the hospital as "the Magic Seven." Where you saw one of us, you found seven. We were always together. Any time you needed help, there were six there. It was another whole team with varied personalities. None of us knew each other before we hit the hospital. But we took care of each other. It's been 36 years, and we're still taking care of each other. A guy called me on the telephone last Sunday. We're still taking care of each other in one sense or another.

So, psychologically you're still with the Marines but physically you're with this unit in Europe.

Right.

What kind of duty were you expected to do?

I was the corpsman and was supposed to take care of the detachment. Routine illnesses and what have you. Make sure that all their shot records were up to date and they're doing what they're supposed to do. The guys with the detachment and I became a team very easily because I was very sincere about what I was doing. They weren't accustomed to that.

How long were you in Europe before you came back?

About 13 or 14 weeks.

Where did you go when you got back to the States?

That's another chapter in the book. Suffice it to say that the men sincerely appreciated a corpsman who did his job.

Did you get out of the Navy right after that?

I reported back into VAP-62 who sent me over to the dispensary. On paper I was TAD. I checked out of the dispensary and went back to VAP-62 and checked out. Then I went down to see this enlistment officer before I left the Navy, and was discharged.

What did you do after you got out of the Navy?

That's a hard one for a corpsman. They don't know anything. That's one I want to address someday with the proper people. Essentially, the Navy is interested in filling the billets, promoting the people so they can fill the upper billets--the NCO billets. I really don't have that much understanding of the officer system. They're interested in them providing a service while they're in the military, but if they get out of the military, they could really care less.

So how did you make a living?

Between that time and the time I got into school, it was gas stations, mechanics. What do you know at that point? What do you do when you get out of the military and you're a hospital corpsman with a potful of experience? Once you're a corpsman, you can't get out. That's what you are. Once you're in medicine, you're in medicine.

And that's the reason you stayed in medicine all these years?

That's the only reason. It damn sure wasn't for the money.

I understand that you went to nursing school.

Right. I went to an associate degree program at a junior college. It was one of those 3-year, 2-year programs. Nobody graduates that program in 2 years. But you still only get an AS in nursing. In the meantime, I worked for a pathologist for a while as his personal assistant. We got along fairly well, considering. It was the right place, the right time, and what the Lord intended. We were flying about 20 hours a week. I was in the right seat handling the pedals and he was telling me what to do. Sound crazy?

Is this in a clinic or are we talking about an aircraft?

This was in a Cessna Skymaster. He had been in an automobile accident and had multiple fractures of the feet, ankles, legs, and ribs. He was a pathologist in town and basically needed personal care on a continuous basis. He was a Mayo Clinic representative from New York. He was a brilliant man but a pain in the ass. He couldn't get anyone to stay with him because he cursed, screamed, and yelled. But I didn't take it from him which was what he needed. It worked out well except that he became extremely dependent upon me. It was a very difficult relationship.

How did you end up running the clinic you're running now?

As I said, I was doing mechanical work while I was going to school. It was the only way I knew to make a dime. The only thing I had ever done was mechanical work on my own cars and what have you. So I could do that--pumping gas and doing mechanical work. Your hands are always dirty. Finally, the director of nurses at the nursing school called me in and said, "If you come to school again and you don't have your hands clean, you're out of school." When you're doing very greasy, dirty work, it gets in the pores. So I had to stop doing that.

I went to Memorial Hospital here in Jacksonville and they didn't have anything open. I had no idea what I was qualified to do. Basically, I was qualified to do nothing. A nursing assistant, a bedpan carrier. I was made aware that the personnelman was a retired Navy personnel officer. I took my service record with me and a lady came out and said, "We don't have anything." I asked her if she would kindly hand my record to the personnelman. "I told you we don't have anything." But she went in there and handed him my service record. He walked up to the door and said, "Mr. Ingram, come in. What are you qualified to do?"

So I had a job. I think I was making \$2.23 an hour. But by that time I was married and had to do something. But I made it through. It took awhile.

So, you went to school again.

I was in nursing school. I worked at the hospital as a nursing assistant. I worked as an EKG technician, a pulmonary functions technician, as an orthopedic technician, all in this year and a half at the hospital. When I graduated from nursing school, I went to work there as a graduate nurse. Got my RN and became the rotating float because it paid 27 cents an hour more. I was doing a lot of time in the emergency room which was not where I wanted to be, psychologically.

One of the docs at NAS JAX was now the emergency room doctor down there, Dr. Jeremiah. They liked me down there because I handled trauma very well, particularly psychologically. When the shit hit the fan, I was cool, and most of them weren't.

My present senior physician and one of the docs who worked in the ER wanted to start a paramedical examination business and they had researched the situation. They were looking for military corpsmen or medics, male with nursing degrees. So they hired me and I worked the first 2 months for nothing to get the business started. About a year later it became obvious that the money was not going to flow there. Too many hands. With the direction of my senior physician, I bought the other partners out and then handed it all back to him. And I became his manager. So I ran his practice which was a single physician practice at that time, and the examining facility. They brought a doc into my facility as a second doc. Then we brought the third and the fourth, and the fifth. Then we built two more buildings and here it is 32 years later and bigger is not always better.

What's the name of the organization?

Jacksonville Family Practice Associates.

And you manage the whole operation.

Yes. I'm the operations manager.

I understand that you went back to Vietnam a few years ago.

In 2000 we had gotten about 25 enlisted guys back together. And somebody said, "Let's go back to Nam." I wasn't too crazy about the idea. Really not knowing my psychological response. But they insisted that I go with them. Once again, you've got a team. Not much left of it, but you've got a team.

So, against my wife's wishes, we took off for Nam. We went back to most of the places where we had big battles. I also went back there in 2001. And the only reason I went back then was because the guys insisted. When we left there I said, "You guys understand it right now before we ever get back. I don't need this place. I've already seen all I need to see and I'm not coming back. So don't ask."

When you went on those two trips, what was it like for you? It must have been a strange experience.

How many hours did you say we had?

As many as you want.

This is going to be the longest interview you ever did.

It's getting close. That's all right. I've got plenty of tape and plenty of time. So what did you feel like? It must have been a hell of an experience.

I kept asking myself months before, "What in the hell are you doing? Why do you want to go back there?" Of course, my wife, my boss, and everybody who knew me said, "Why do you want to do this?" And I told them I wasn't sure. "The guys want to go back and they want me to go with them." They've gotta have their corpsman, right? It's right back to the same old thing.

Looking at it after the first year, I think I needed some kind of geographic confirmation of my memories. It's the only thing I can come up with. There were a lot of emotions amongst all the guys. And once again, it was the corpsman taking care of the Marines, and vice versa.

How many were you altogether?

Well there were 13 Marines and 1 civilian. It was tough getting there because we were all in turmoil about how we were going to feel and how we were going to react. Of course, in that we were all there together. When you have a real friend, it's okay to let yourself go. If you felt like crying, you could cry. If you felt like cursing, you could curse. And everybody understood. Everybody was with you. And I think it happened to all of us. I know it did. It really screwed up a couple of them.

Going back did?

Yeah.

What about you?

Well . . . I was searching for something and found what I was searching for. And what I found was yesterday was yesterday. We get into some deep shit here. I don't discuss it with most people.

The day I got injured I had a real hard time. I think we talked about that. But the Lord was with me the second half of that day in March [1966]. And when I got back over there, I searched and searched. I went back out on that plateau alone since I'm the only one who was on that plateau who was still around. The guys wanted to go with me for psychological support, I think. I asked them not to.

So I went running around that area trying to think and see and remember but wasn't being too effective. And then I found the spot where I got hit in the head, I think. It didn't matter. I was really soul-searching, trying to find something but wasn't getting anything. I reached down and picked up some dirt. And I was thinking about the blood that was in that dirt, really, really trying to soul-search. And I got nothing except the fact that the Lord was still there--same spot, same way. A true experience from a religious standpoint. I knew on March 28th, 1966 that He was there and He was with me. And I knew on March 28th, 2000, that He was still there--the same spot, same place. I was searching tremendously to try and find something there, and what I was looking for has always been there. I didn't need to go back to Nam to find it.

We don't want to be printing this.

I think this is very powerful stuff. I don't see anything to be ashamed of.

I'm not ashamed of it.

It's a private thing you don't want to share with other people. Is that it?

It's a personal thing. I have shared it with several people. But when I share it, I try to make sure there's a reason for sharing it. I don't know how it comes off to someone else, but to me it's the most powerful thing that happened in my life.

Was it the experience of being injured and feeling the presence of God there? Or was it more being there the second time around and having the same feeling that He was there again, or was there still?

That confirmation I was talking about, He gave me confirmation that I was right the first time.

I understand. You had the feeling when you were so badly injured and near death, that God was there. And when you returned to that spot the second time, it just confirmed the fact that you had been right the first time.

Exactly. I shared this with a minister one time who obviously did not accept that as an experience. And I was very hurt that he didn't follow it or understand it, or didn't believe it, or whatever. And he's a man of God.

Just because you have it in your job description doesn't mean you have to understand it.

True. When I was over there that second time, I was sitting there picking dirt up and doing all this soul-searching stuff and then the Lord revealed Himself to me again. The men are not there; the blood is not there. And this was yesterday, and I'm still here.

At that point I started laughing. One of my buddies was watching very carefully because he was very concerned about me. I walked over to him and I was laughing. He said, "Doc, are you okay?"

And I said, "Hey, I'm as good as I can possibly be."

Being on that same piece of ground was like a revelation.

I don't know what it was. Maybe the Lord was saying, "Bob, did you ever have a doubt? What are you here for doing all this soul-searching for when the answer was there the first time, you dumb ass? You weren't listening to me."

And was the funny part. I'm doing all this deep intellectual soul-searching and it's not important. The guys who gained the most from their trip back learned that this was a different day. It was a bad thing, but it was a good thing, but it was a bad thing. But, most importantly, it was yesterday and you need to leave it in yesterday.

But in order to do that, you had to see it again.

For some of the guys, yeah. I've talked to them at great length about our trip back.

But what about you? Looking back at it, did you feel it was necessary to go back or maybe you didn't have to do it?

Well, I didn't feel it was necessary to go back, period.

They just convinced you to go with them because they needed you.

That and I really had this desire to confirm the area and the way things happened. I think I told you once before that every man had his own battle. You could have been 10 feet from somebody else and your battle and his battle was different. What was going on in your mind and what was going on physically and mentally was all different. It's a different battle for everybody.

Over the years, before you went back to Vietnam, did you ever play the 28th of March over and over in your mind?

No. I was the corpsman, yes, but I became part of the fighting team. The fighting had to come first. They can argue with me all they like, but that's just the way it is. That's why I carried weapons and did what I did.

When you go into a situation, your CO is bringing you in. He has the big picture; you don't. As I found out later, we were in the wrong spot anyway. The after action report indicates that we were in the wrong spot. Had we not been in the wrong spot, we wouldn't have

encountered the enemy the way we did. And this is one of the things that screwed the CO up. He made an error. And that error to him caused all those deaths.

In actuality, that was the way it was meant to be anyway. I have been unable to convince him of this but, hopefully, someday I will.

Things happen the way they're supposed to happen. I'm a firm believer in that. Just like my experience there. I'm totally convinced that this was what was intended. And me walking out of there was intended, for some reason. I don't know what the reason is but it's not up to me to decide. God had a plan for me somewhere. I don't know what that plan is. All I know is that when the time comes, I seem to know when to talk about it and when not to. And I do the best I can, and rely on Him for the words.

So you went to Vietnam twice.

The second time the guys kept saying, "Doc, you gotta go, you gotta go. We need to go." We had left some money in that village, a significant amount of money because we wanted to build a memorial there for all of those who died there that day--the Marines, the villagers, and the North Vietnamese. Psychologically, this is an important point. The NVA were just like we were. They were sent out there to do a job. They didn't have any personal contempt or hate for us. We didn't have any personal contempt or hate for them. It's an unforgettable experience to kill somebody, particularly when you realize that they're just doing their job like you are. But you don't have a choice. At that point, most of the guys from Charley Company totally agree with that because they've had a similar experience. They don't have contempt for these people.

So our memorial was very important to us. We left about \$3,000 in cash there.

Who did you give the money to? Did you pay a contractor or something?

We had an agreement with the village chief. They actually drew up a contract right there. The work was to be done by the village people. The NVA police were there with us. The NVA guy first said that he knew someone who could come in and build this thing. And we said no, that's not what we wanted. And since it was our money, we were calling the shots. We wanted the villagers to be able to build it because number one, it was their village. There were a few people who were in the village on 28 March of '66. They totally understood why we were building it because we discussed it with them. They were very passionate about what we were doing. Very proud of what we were doing. And we wanted the people in the village to benefit from that work--in cash.

They have very little money; you're talking about \$150 a year max income per family. So \$3,000 is a batch of money. The materials they both bought and dragged down from the mountains. They constructed it themselves. By the time they were through, they ran out of money and then put their own money in it. And they donated their labor.

We went back there in 2001. There were two reasons I went back. Number one, to see if it had been built. We had also left some more money there to build a school. The real reason they talked me into it was . . . Harvey Kappeler, the weapons platoon man, was on 90 percent of the patrols I was on. He didn't go the first time. We needed to go back to the place where the mine blew up on February 12th and got everybody. Well, that was Harvey's big day. He was the guy I brought out of there.

The guy you dragged out of there.

Yeah. Harvey wanted to go back to that spot. He had a need to go back to that hill. He said, "Doc, if I go back and you don't go back, I'm not going to have anybody to talk to because nobody's around. We're the only two who know that hill."

Did you find it?

Oh, yeah, we found it with much difficulty. Let me put it this way. The mine was big enough to crack a rock, which was like 40 feet around, in half. I found half of it in the rice paddy and the other half was washed out on the side of the hill. Of course, things have been displaced greatly. I went through great efforts to find that thing. And Harvey just stood there and said, "Well, I'll be damned." And that was it.

So he stood there looking at it and he said that he saw all he needed to see.

That's all he needed. He said, "I don't know what the hell I wanted to go back there for." I think Harvey did well going over there. We've talked about it at great length and he says, "I didn't think there was anything there anyway."

Did you get to see the monument?

We got closer to the village this time. The first time back in 2000, we humped about 7 or 8 miles or more to get to this area. This time we were able to get closer. We got within 4 ½ or 5 miles of the village. When we got about halfway there, the people of the village started coming out and then following us. When they saw these Marines coming down the trail, they just dropped everything, and everybody came out of the rice paddies.

It was really kind of eery. By the time we got to the village, we must have had 200 to 300 people around us. The memorial was about 50 feet behind the school and they were so proud of it and the school they had built. The little schoolhouse was probably about 30 by 14. They had built wooden desks and they had painted the plastered walls all these different colors that you see in the orient. They were so proud of that and they were so pleased that we came back to see it. And we had a little service there celebrating what they had done..

What did the memorial look like?

It was a three-section memorial. The center represented the village. They had carved the names of the people they knew who had died that day in this huge stone in the center. Then they wrote in English a little saying about the Marines, which didn't go over very well with the NVA. We were their liberators.

They had written something on the stone indicating that you were their liberators?

Yes. The NVA didn't like it too well. The NVA have probably blown that rock apart by now. On the other side, which made the NVA feel a little better, they wrote something in Vietnamese which said something about men who fight in war, not for personal gain, but because they're fighting for their country. It was a nice piece. We were very proud that it was there. Not for our purposes but for anybody in that village. Those kids are going to hear that there was a war. Well, let them see that the Marines were not bad people and the North Vietnamese were not bad people, and that the villagers just happened to be there. And that it was important to pay respect to all who died there that day--on all the sides. And that idea went across very well with them.

These village people are a lot like the country people in the South here. They're very honest. They're very conservative and family-oriented. They still hate the North Vietnamese, but that's beside the point. The North Vietnamese don't go there very often.

Did you feel better about the second trip, being able to see all this?

Well, I was just tickled to death to see that they had actually done it. I was impressed when I learned that they had completed it even after having run out of money. We had told them we were going to come back the following year on this same day, and we did. And they were so proud they had done exactly what they said they were going to do. And that they had put themselves in it.

Did you plan it to be on the 28th of March?

Yes we did, both years.

That must have been pretty powerful stuff.

It was pretty powerful. I was just thrilled that someone hadn't stolen the money and run off with it. And the fact that they were so proud of it. I didn't expect that. I didn't expect to see the villagers with that much pride over the past. Because most of those people were not there and didn't know anything about what happened there. It's like a history book for them. All the positions the NVA were in are still there in the side of the hill--the machine gun areas, the anti-aircraft areas. And these kids run all over these hills all the time. You know they ask questions. "What's this hole here in the side of the cliff?" It's a living history for them.

These kids are so far from transportation that they don't go to school. The women and the men are working and they can't walk these kids out that far to catch a bus or whatever to go to school. So the only schooling they get is lower than an elementary education. Most of them were not reading or writing or adding and subtracting except what they learned from counting rice bags or whatever. The simple fact was that we built that school.

The village chief at that time had a daughter who was going to college in Saigon. She was back there in 2001 when we came. She was going to be the teacher at the school. One of our interpreters came from that village as a child. And he was only 22 years old. He wasn't there back in '66. In the bus on the way back, he said, "You have no idea what you have done for this village. The possibility of these children ever having any education at all or having a desire to be educated is nil. You have created a situation where this may be one of the most educated villages in all of the Central Highlands area. Because they have the desire to learn."

We've sent pencils and pens. One of the guys is married to a Vietnamese girl and she purchased books and sent them there for this school. We've gotten a lot of financial support from our group. Out of those 13 guys and a few others who wished to donate, we're probably talking about \$18,000 to \$20,000 worth of materials went to that village between the memorial and the school. And they all felt good about it.

And you feel good about it?

Yeah. I feel good about it.

If you look back at the experience of these two trips, you probably have a different thought about it now than before you went.

Just that the people didn't let me down.

The Vietnamese in the village?

Yeah. That's probably the big point to me. These people are respectable. I always did respect the country people. I didn't know anything about the city people.

How did the Medal of Honor all come about?

Late one Sunday evening in 1995 my platoon commander from 3rd Platoon called me. He'd had my number for 12 years and didn't feel like it was right. Four days later, I met him in Alabama at a place he's got out there. As we're walking down the beach talking about our Vietnam days. He asked me what medals I had received for 28 March. I told him "The Purple Heart, why?"

He said, "You didn't receive the Medal of Honor?"

I laughed and said, "For what?"

He said, "Are you aware that you were put up for a Medal of Honor?"

"No."

"The Purple Heart's the only medal you have?"

"No, I have a Silver Star."

Well, he was assuming that the Silver Star was for 28 March, but that was for February 8th. I received that when I was at NAS JAX. In any event, we didn't say any more about it that weekend and I spent 2 ½ days with him.

A couple of weeks later, he called me and said, "I want you to come out to my house in Arkansas." This was Memorial Day weekend of '95. So my wife and I packed up and I'm looking forward to seeing him. We pull into Jonesboro, Arkansas, find his house, walk in the door, and all of the officers from Charley Company are there. None of the enlisted guys, just the officers. The reason was, he could find the officers but he couldn't find the enlisted men because nobody would give him any information. The officers were on some kind of register. He had talked to one of them a couple of times and said, "Look, this is important. I want you to be here Memorial Day."

So that was the beginning of that. The commanding officer and the 3rd Platoon commander, and at that point, the battalion major, who had retired full bird, were all there. And these were people who were involved in the writing of the package initially. They said that they were going to look into this and rewrite it. They had already done some preliminary work. They said they would find the old material. The major was a big part of it because he knew people and he had worked at Headquarters Marine Corps and he'd baby-sat half the high ranking officers up there in his many tours of duty. That's how the thing started. The Medal of Honor was presented in 1998.

What do you remember about that whole deal? You ended up going to the White House and having the president put it on. You must have some thoughts about that.

Well, I wanted [GEN Charles] Krulak to give it to me over at Headquarters and let me go about my business. I am not a Clinton fan, never have been, never was, never will be. I have a bit of contempt for him; I'm sorry.

I was supposed to go and get it in February but my son was severely injured in February of '98. I did not go. One of the colonels was supposed to be presented at the same time. He received his, not in the White House but in the Pentagon with five of his buddies there. And he refused to acknowledge the president. He would not look him in the eye. He wasn't nasty; he just refused to acknowledge Clinton out of his dislike for the man.

About 2 weeks after the Medal was presented, he called me. I'd never met the guy before in my life. All I know is that we were supposed to be presented together. He says, "Doc, I know you don't know me but I know you know the Corps. I spent 33 years in the United States Marine Corps and I just broke everything that I ever stood for." And he told me what he did. He said, "I let my friends talk me into making a statement which should not have been made. You're supposed to respect the office and I did not respect the office. And for that I am sincerely, deeply hurt that I allowed my own desires and needs to overcome my military background. This is not Clinton. This is the president. And the president is charged by Congress to present this medal. He's doing his job." He was very, very down about it.

So, he was giving you a pep talk.

He was telling me that honor, courage, and commitment in the Marine Corps is all about respect, and you respect the office whether you respect the man or not. And this is what leadership is. As long as I spent in the Corps and as much attention as I paid to their absolute ways, I understood his point very well.

So you could accept it that way.

Yes. I could accept it that way.

And that's why you conducted yourself the way you did.

Exactly.

Having received the Medal of Honor and being a member of a very special group . . .

That's where the trouble started. The Medal is very heavy to wear. The Lord tells me you need to be humble and that's where I want to be. The Medal didn't make me what I am.

You say it's very heavy to wear. Do you feel a special responsibility?

People are always looking at you. One of the recipients, who is now deceased, talked with me for several hours after I received the Medal. He basically laid it out for me. "Doc, you're gonna be in places you've never been before. Where you eat. Where you sleep. Where you work. They're constantly going to be evaluating you based on the fact that you're a Medal of Honor recipient. They expect you to be above everything." Does that make sense?

Yes. It's a burden.

He said, "If you're drinking, you better not drink much. You can't get drunk. If you're talking, you better not talk out of line. If you're dressing, you can't run around sloppy anymore. You can't get arrested. You can't be a bad boy. That's what the Medal of Honor Society is all about--being an example. Therefore, you must conduct yourself in a proper manner." Then he looked at me and said, "And I will expect you to do so. That's a personal thing between me and you."

I didn't think it would be a big problem but I didn't realize how difficult it was.

You obviously feel a sense of responsibility being a Medal of Honor recipient.

How do you say no to people who ask you to come and speak, give an opinion . . . I kinda laugh sometimes. Before I got this medal, nobody knew who I was, where I'd been, or what I'd done. My job has been interrupted tremendously. Every former Marine, every former

Navy, and half the former Army. Everybody who walks through my door at the office who has seen, heard, read, or finds out that I work there, has to come and shake my hand. You'd understand if you had anywhere from one to five people a day interrupt your work to shake your hand and tell you how proud they were of you--which is all good.

It's a burden.

It's an interruption. I get in a room with these flight physicals and about 80 percent of these pilots are ex military and they want to talk about the Medal.

And you don't particularly want to talk about it.

I don't have a big problem talking about my experience in Vietnam. But it takes time. And most of these guys who want to talk to me about it have their own problem. And that's really what they're talking about. They want some confirmation. They want to talk to somebody who's been there. And the Medal qualifies me. "This guy's got the Medal of Honor; he's qualified."

You have credibility. Obviously, they have to listen to you. But from your point of view, you've got a job to do and you have to run a clinic. You want to be gracious. You can't tell them not to ask questions. It's a duty that was thrust upon you. You didn't ask of it. But now that you've got it, you have to deal with it.

And I feel responsible to do it. When a guy sits down in a chair and says, "Hey Doc, do you ever have any problem like . . ." And he's not talking about his medical problems. He's not talking about his flight physical. He's talking about a personal problem he has with his experience. He's asking me because he wants my opinion. I'm basically being his shrink on the side. My boss will walk in the room and say, "Bob, you've got three people waiting." And this happens all the time.

If you go out somewhere to a party or whatever, you're there a few minutes and then you see these people getting their position and they wait until they can get a one on one with you. Then they start talking to me about the Medal and the war. "Tell me about what happened."

Then you get the wannabes--the guys who say they should have a Medal of Honor. I don't know. Maybe this guy did deserve a Medal of Honor because I know a bunch of them who deserve the Medal of Honor were with me. So you can't say to this guy, "What are you, a wannabe or something?"

You gotta be gracious. You don't want to hurt anybody's feelings but you're always thinking to yourself, "Why the hell don't they leave me alone and let me have my meal."

Exactly. When I go out to speak, I don't ever remember what I've eaten. Half the time I don't eat anything. When I leave there, I go get something to eat. Everybody wants to shake your hand. Everybody wants to tell you how proud they are of you. And all of this is good.

My poor wife. Can you imagine the problems that come up in a marriage? We have a big joke. When she emails me she signs NOMO. I'm the MO and she's the NOMO. When you go out to speak, you introduce yourself and introduce your wife. And that's the end of the wife for the evening.

At least she gets a chance to eat.

There will be 15 people who want to talk to me at length and she's in the way. Can you imagine this, now? I was out in California and they sent me out to this middle school to talk to

some problem kids. They were 6th, 7th, and 8th grade kids. They brought them all together in the lunch room and we did a little talk about courage, honor, and commitment. Doing the right thing and being a team. That's what I talk about. The kids recognized it very well. I was very pleased that they responded the way they did. And they asked good questions. But afterwards, the principal said, "If you'd like an autograph from Mr. Ingram, he'd be glad to do that." They all ran up with their little programs and they were just as cute as they could be. And then they started asking my wife for her autograph. She was so tickled she said, "I didn't think anybody cared who I was." But the kids were looking at it as Daddy and Mama. And Mama is just as important as Daddy. And that was good.

When you go out and talk about the Medal, how do you do it?

When I talk about the Medal I talk about the fact that I was fortunate enough to be a part of a team--Charley 1/7. And how we functioned together, how we became a team, looked after each other, and developed a love for each other that's beyond understanding. That's the direction I go in because that's what I believe it was all about. The shoot 'em bang, bang. I don't want to think about that. It's not important. People ask me, "Did you ever kill anybody? How did you do it? What did he look like?"

Obviously, that's not the important part of all this. I find these kinds of questions offensive. You weren't there because you wanted to kill people.

I don't think anybody in their right mind was. I'm sure there were a few around who had that desire but their heart was in the wrong place to start with.

Well, you're not going to believe this, but we've been talking for 2 hours and 20 minutes.

And we haven't gotten started yet.

No. I think we've covered what we needed to cover. There may some more but I've gotta let you get some rest because you have to go to work tomorrow. By the way, my offer still stands. If you need some help writing your book, I'd be happy to help you.

I don't know. I have ambiguous feelings about it.

I got that feeling as I was talking to you. But when you go over the transcript it might trigger a response. You might say, "Hey, I've got most of it right here. I can use this." And that's the whole idea.

Let me wish you a good night and thank you again for all your help. The next time you come up this way, I hope I know you're coming so I don't miss you like I did last time. I'd like to shake hands with you and ask you what it's like to have the Medal of Honor. No, I'm just kidding. I'm not going to do that, I promise. I'll just say "Hi" and shake your hand.

Shake my hand and say, "I know what it's like for you to have the Medal. You told me already."